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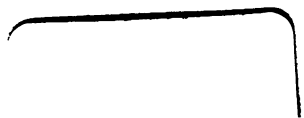
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L A D Y B A B Y

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A NOVEL

BY

DOROTHEA GERARD

JOINT-AUTHOR OF

'REATA,' 'BEGGAR MY NEIGHBOUR,' 'WATERS OF HERCULES,' ETC.

AUTHOR OF 'ORTHODOX'

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

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Dedicated to

MY KIND AND HONOURED FRIEND,

PRINCESS SOPHIE D'ARENBERG,

née PRINCESS D'AUERSPERG,

IN MEMORY OF MANY HAPPY HOURS.

CONTENTS OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. THE WHISKY-TRAIN'S CRANK-AXLE, . . .	1
II. A. B. C., ...	26
III. A BORDER RAID, ...	63
IV. SIR PETER, ...	92
V. CLEOPATRA, ...	109
VI. CLEOPATRA AT HOME, ...	138
VII. WHEAL TALLY-HO, ...	162
VIII. AJAX, ...	174
IX. THE "DOWSING-ROD,"	204
X. STELLA, ...	218
XI. THE UGLY FENCE, ...	240
XII. LADY EUPHROSYNE, ...	257
XIII. LADY BABY TRIES AN EXPERIMENT, . . .	289

L A D Y B A B Y.



CHAPTER I.

THE WHISKY-TRAIN'S CRANK-AXLE.

"I sing no tale of high renown."

MR CARBURY was just beginning drowsily to wonder whether his corner of the railway-carriage was or was not comfortable enough for a snooze, when the question was settled by his finding himself abruptly jerked out of it. Without emitting a single warning shriek or a single threatening groan, the train had suddenly stood stock-still. As he gathered himself together and let down the window, Mr Carbury confessed to himself that nothing but the comfortable jog-

VOL. I.

A

trot pace by which for the last hour his patience had been so sorely tried, could have saved him from a severe shaking.

Other windows had been let down and other heads put out, but no one appeared to be in the least alarmed, or even particularly surprised; and the questions put to the guard, who was familiarly addressed as, "Eh, Sandy, man!" or "Hist! Sandy, lad," consisted solely of friendly "chaff." Somebody cheerily inquired whether the water was off the boil. Some one else wished to know whether Mrs Johnston's cow was on the line again, or whether it was Mrs Wallace's bairn this time.

"Na, na!" said the imperturbable Sandy, after a little more wit had been aired, "it's no' the coo, and it's no' the bairn; it's jist the whusky-train's crank-axle gane wrang."

"Williams," said Mr Carbury to his valet, who at a sign had hurried up, "find out what the whisky-train's crank-axle is, and how long it is going to keep us here."

Williams shot off, and presently returned with the following facts ascertained,—that there were

several trucks laden with whisky-casks blocking the line; that the fresh engine could not be here for an hour, or—for Sandy declined to commit himself—"maybe twa"; that, owing to the want of an available siding, the passenger-train could do nothing to help the "whusky-train," and consequently nothing to help itself; but that (in Sandy's opinion) it did not after all matter much, as the station was only a hundred yards off. "Aweel," he had soothingly remarked in answer to the sharp questioning of the valet, "it's no' so bad either. There's no express behind us. I wudna be put aboot if I was you."

But Mr Carbury, thus reported to, was by no means soothed. Though there might be no express behind them, there was one in front of them—or rather, there was the chance of catching the London mail at the junction, a close-run chance in the best of cases, but which the "whusky-train's crank-axle," and the hour's delay its breakdown entailed, had conclusively settled beyond all hope of redemption.

"Williams," said Mr Carbury wearily, as he

descended from the carriage, "find out what's to be done ;" and as the agile Williams hurried off once more in search of some practical solution of the difficulty, Mr Carbury, following more slowly, bent his mind to a dispassionate and disconsolate review of his situation.

He had been paying a visit in the south-east of Scotland, and was now on his way back to London ; the station a hundred yards off was strange to him, he was not aware of knowing any one in the immediate neighbourhood, the afternoon shadows were beginning to grow long, and there was a night between this and the next train that was likely to be of any use. Such was the sum of his position ; not at all pathetic, not at all affecting, calling for no depth of pity either from gods or men, and yet amply sufficient to test the meekness of a canonised saint. It had not even the dignity of an accident. It was like a shipwreck with the inconveniences but without the romance. Also it lacked the sympathy of fellow-suffering, for the rest of the travellers,—not more than a dozen in all,—were of the strictly local species, and to

them the London train was a matter of indifference. By the time Mr Carbury reached the station Williams had verified the worst features of the case, and had furthermore ascertained that there was no inn worth the name at the junction, while the "Kippendale Arms" at the village close by was reported to furnish decent accommodation. In the blackest of humours, Mr Carbury therefore resigned himself to his fate. A wheelbarrow for his portmanteau was luckily forthcoming, and under the watchful superintendence of Williams it was presently despatched. As for himself, the short cut across the fields was recommended. It did not do for the wheelbarrow, on account of the stiles.

"But ye canna miss it," explained the rustic porter. "Ye've but to gang ahead till ye get to the bit plank ower the burn, and when ye've turned wast o' Mrs Armstrong's hoose, ye'll tak' the path by Jock M'Clocharty's kail-yaird. Ony callant ye speir at on the way will show it ye; and when ye're past the wud, and hae gotten the kirk richt ahead o' ye——"

But the stranger, with a gesture of depreca-

tion, had tossed a silver piece to the informant, and was walking off leisurely in the direction indicated.

"Looks gey furrin-like," remarked a bystander, staring after the tall figure of the traveller.

"His siller's English, onyway," answered the porter, pocketing his shilling.

Meanwhile Mr Carbury was moodily pursuing his way, not troubling himself much to unravel the true meaning of the directions that had been given him.

Had he been impressionable to outward influences, surely the pure sunshine which had burst out after a long grey day could not have failed to coax him from his ill-humour. It was early spring, and there were lambs in some of the fields he passed through; but Mr Carbury had never been able to see anything worth noticing in a lamb off a dish: he even kicked one of the innocent creatures that reflected too long before getting out of his path; and his frame of mind was so far from idyllic that a young heifer that came trotting up, confident

and curious, was rewarded by a threatening wave of his stick, which sent it back scampering to its companions.

His mind, at first occupied with gloomy anticipations of overdone beef and an under-stuffed mattress, soon turned bitterly to the instability of crank-axles ; and so engrossed did he become in framing imaginary letters to the 'Times' upon the subject, that when the end of the meadow brought him to an open gate, he walked straight in, heedless of his surroundings, and unconscious of trespassing. He had just reached the conclusion that the improvement in the system of crank-axles was one of the burning questions of the day, when his meditations were broken by an approaching sound. It was the sound of galloping hoofs.

He looked around him, and became aware that he was standing upon private ground. The galloping horse passed him at some little distance ; he caught the glimpse of a red coat, and he remembered that this must be one of the latest, if not the last hunting-day of the season.

The ground which he had invaded was a long grass avenue, bordered on each side by clumps of rhododendrons, over whose heads the budding beeches and oaks stretched their arms protectingly. Looking back, he could see in the distance the open gate through which he had entered; looking forward, the broad green path seemed to lead straight to the foot of heather-clad hills, whose sweeping lines loomed coldly purple against the sky. In the grass at his feet the very first daisies were nestling; on the highest branch of the highest beech an enamoured blackbird was disburdening its heart to the echoes; while the setting sun, like a penitent miser on his death-bed, was making the most of its last hour, and remorsefully trying to atone for its sins of avarice by a burnt-offering of the purest gold.

It was scarcely spring yet; it was only the hint of spring, the promise of that which was to follow, of the colour and perfume which still lay folded away in a million brown buds on the trees, or buried an inch deep under the fresh sod. It was the time when grass-blades are

prized higher than roses will be in June, and when people still think it worth while to stoop for a daisy, or to stand still and listen when a bird is singing.

Mr Carbury did not stoop for the daisy, he looked at the prospect and yawned ; and again he wished that some one would invent a better sort of crank-axle.

“ My ideas with regard to the characteristics of a kail-yard are somewhat unpronounced,” he reflected, as he gazed about him ; “ but I’ll take my oath that this is *not* Jock M’Clochart’s kail-yard. Why, here is another horse,—several other horses.”

A stretch of low paling was visible to the right, and just as Mr Carbury was in the act of turning to retrace his steps, a fine bay hunter, ridden by a white-whiskered, red-faced man, in hunting attire, appeared on the other side of the paling, cleared it with ease, and crossing the grass avenue, disappeared in one of the glades to the left. At the same moment another group of riders turned on to the avenue at a short distance off. These were two ladies, one mounted

on a dark brown, the other on a singularly tall and powerful chestnut. A grey-haired groom followed.

"This is becoming a nuisance," thought Mr Carbury, as the horses vanished among the trees. "As yet I am unperceived, but presently, I suppose, I shall be taken up for trespassing. I wonder where I am? That stout woman on the chestnut strikes me as being not quite a novelty. I have seen her before, and I have seen her on horseback too, and yet I can't quite put a name to the face."

He had turned now, and was walking back towards the gate, when once more the sound of galloping hoofs fell on his ear, and there came tearing up the avenue towards him a riderless horse, wet with foam, and splashed with mud up to the girths. As the beast thundered past, shying violently at sight of him, Mr Carbury perceived that one of the stirrup-leathers was broken, which had probably caused the rider's fall. The bridle had slipped forward, and threatened every moment to trip up the excited animal in a noose.

"Plenty of horses about, at anyrate," reflected Mr Carbury, as he looked after the runaway. "Now I wonder whether Christianity or Humanity, or whatever they call the thing, demands that I should hunt up the unhorsed rider? Ten to one he is lying all of a heap somewhere in the neighbourhood, and his relatives, if they be such, seem to be on ahead. This is becoming more and more of a nuisance. I wish that confounded crank-axle had managed to stick together for a little longer!" And in a worse humour than ever, Mr Carbury retraced his steps down the grass avenue, glancing now and then listlessly and ever more listlessly, to the right and to the left, among the trees for a sight of the dismounted rider. But his eye fell only on the tangles of last year's ferns, or upon the ghosts of dead hemlock, upright still after all the winter's storms. He had almost forgotten about the supposed victim, when there arose a commotion among the bushes beside him, a crackling of twigs, a bending of boughs, and the sound of heavy breathing. "Another horse, I suppose," he thought, resignedly, and stepped

aside just as the shaggy black head of a pony emerged from among the bushes. In another moment the pony had struggled free of the branches, and Mr Carbury now perceived that its rider was a girl, or, as it appeared to him, a child, in a rough home-spun riding-habit. She was bending forward in the saddle, and with one arm held above her face, was shielding herself from the branches which closed again behind her. As she reached the clear space she dropped her arm and her eyes fell full upon those of Mr Carbury, who was standing aside to let her pass. She glanced at him in surprise, and was about to touch up her pony, when, as if struck with an idea, she reined it in rather sharply, close by Mr Carbury's side, and asked, in a quick, peremptory tone—

“Did she pass this way?”

Mr Carbury was stupid enough to say,
“Who?”

He was not indeed a particularly stupid man, nor one easily flurried; but this young amazon's sudden appearance and imperious glance had

quite swept from his mind the recollection of the runaway horse.

Transported just as she was, pony and all, to Rotten Row, she would doubtless have caused there more amazement than admiration. Nobody in London wore such long, full-skirted habits, nor such wide-brimmed hats, nor such thick gauntlet-gloves; but, in present surroundings, the careless and primitive equipment seemed somehow wonderfully in place. Once, when Mr Carbury was a very young man, he had seen an old print, with the title, "A Morning Ride." It represented the edge of a forest in the early morning, while a girl, mounted on a white palfrey, had evidently just drawn rein in the shade of the trees, and was leaning forward to pat a large dog which sprang up to be caressed. It might have been nothing but the shape of the hat, which now brought back that old print to Mr Carbury's mind. He used to think then that the painter had made the hat by several inches too broad, and now the same thought crossed his mind. The shadow of the hat-brim was so deep that he could not even

determine whether this child was pretty or not, whether he was addressing a blue-eyed or a brown-eyed damsel, a blonde or a brunette. He could see only that her small ear was flushed pink with exercise, that her glistening lips were parted, and that her cheek was round and fresh, as the rosebud which has just burst into sight.

As Mr Carbury uttered his pointless "Who?" the curious and enigmatical child-amazon made a movement, which seemed to suggest that, if she had been on *terra firma*, she would have stamped.

"Who? Why, the mare, of course—a brown, with one white fore-leg, and a white face. Have you seen her?"

"Yes, she passed this way, looking rather wild."

"This way? Then why did you not catch her?"

"It did not occur to me," he candidly replied.

Again the amazon's stirrup gave an ominous click, and the impish-looking black pony, catching the infection from its mistress, champed at its bit, and eyed Mr Carbury through its tangled

mane with a pair of impertinently bright black eyes.

"I suppose you can tell me, at least, which way she went? Up there? Thanks," she said, graciously but shortly, and, with a slight inclination of the head, she put her pony to a gallop, and left Mr Carbury standing where he was, alone under the trees.

Mr Carbury stood for some minutes hesitating, but at last he turned his face back again in his first direction, and renewed his progress up the avenue away from the gate—and this time with a rather less leisurely step. "I ought to be near to lend that child a hand, if necessary," he thought. "I wonder how old she is? She might be twenty in manner; but from what I saw of her face it belongs to the schoolroom; and as for her voice, it's straight from the nursery."

At that very instant the voice in question rang out among the trees, not fifty yards from him. "Suleika!" it called impatiently. "Suleika!" and the youthful rider appeared again, glancing about her from side to side

under the branches, and this time visibly annoyed with what, judging from the state of the black pony's coat, must have been a lively chase.

"Do you not think the mare will have taken the straightest road to her stables?" suggested Mr Carbury, when he was within speaking distance.

"No: the inner gate was shut, and that turned her back. I was close to her once,—I almost had her; ah! there again, beyond the birches. Now, Zet, let us have another try!"

"One moment, please," said Mr Carbury, putting out his hand towards Zet's bridle. "If I might offer a piece of advice, it would be to moderate the pace. Once let it come to galloping, and your pony cannot possibly try conclusions with that brown; but a little stratagem may do it. If you will trot round to the other side of the birch-clump quietly, I will cut off the retreat here, and between us, I think, we shall manage it."

The girl gave him one long steady look, as though weighing the advisability of accepting

his help ; but she ended by making a sign of assent, and trotting off towards the birch-clump.

There followed a breathless ten minutes, during which Mr Carbury, with something that for him almost amounted to energy, and with varying turns of fortune, stalked the mare, much as he might have stalked a stag, and at the end of which he succeeded, by a sudden and very dexterous movement, in getting possession of the bridle.

The girl was sitting quite still on her pony when he brought up the now submissive brown.

"You did that beautifully," she said, with grave approbation. "You could not have done it more beautifully if you had dropped straight from heaven to help me ; and, by the by, where *did* you drop from ? I don't think I have ever seen you before. It can't have been the express intention of catching Suleika that brought you in here, so what was it that *did* bring you ?"

"It was the whisky-train's crank-axle," answered Mr Carbury.

"The what ?"

And then Mr Carbury told his sorrowful tale.

She listened attentively, but without showing any more surprise than the people in the train had done.

"Well, it is hard luck for you," she said at the end. "And I don't think you will get very much to eat at the village ; but since you *have* to get there, it is a pity you did not take the right road instead of the wrong one. You are three miles out of the way now. I wonder how the matter is to be settled." She said this with an air of serious concern, as though the responsibility of the situation rested entirely upon her. "Perhaps the dogcart which has taken Nicky home could drive you to the village."

"Nicky ?" repeated Mr Carbury, struck with a recollection ; "which Nicky ?"

"My brother-in-law, Mr Nicholas Craigtoun," replied the girl, drawing herself up in the saddle, and apparently displeased with the question.

"Nicky Craigtoun ! The world is a small place after all. Craigtoun and I have been great chums in our day." And, as he spoke, Mr Carbury suddenly became able to identify the face of the stout woman of whom he had

caught a glimpse a little time ago. She was Lady Agnes Craigtoun, of course. He remembered now having seen her with her husband at the Blankshire races.

"A friend of Nicky's?" said the girl, in an altered and eager tone, while a bright smile showed her milk-white teeth. "Oh, then the difficulty disappears. Never mind the inn: I will take you home to Kippendale."

"But, really," began Mr Carbury in some amazement, "I do not quite see that I can accept this kind invitation; I know no one of the family except Craigtoun——"

"And myself," she finished for him; "that is quite sufficient. Any one who is a friend of Nicky and Agnes's, is also a friend of mine. You need not have the smallest scruples, Mr —— By the by, perhaps you would not mind introducing yourself," she added, with a return of her former quaint dignity of manner.

"Laurence Carbury," said the stranger, gravely lifting his hat. She inclined her head with the same gravity.

"Thank you; that makes it all right. My

name is Frances Bevan. Well, Mr Carbury, have you made up your mind? Are you going to sleep at the Kippendale Arms or at Kippendale House?"

She had noted the indecision on his face, for he was asking himself whether this welcome but oddly given invitation was to be considered seriously or as a joke. If there had only been some one, an elder sister, or even a governess, by to ratify this strange child's proposal, his mind would have been easier by far. He feebly suggested that his bags and his servant were at the village; but she disposed of that objection at once by saying she would have them fetched. He did not think they could be reclaimed in time for the dressing-gong; she considered this of no consequence whatever,—Nicky could lend him a spare dress-coat. "And I suppose you will be able to get into it without your servant for once."

"I suppose so," he said with a laugh, which, nevertheless, had a touch of dismay in it; for, to tell the truth, the prospect of appearing in a coat not measured to his person was as little

agreeable to his vanity as the prospect of putting it on without Williams at his elbow was agreeable to his indolence.

"You could even dine without a dress-coat for once," she added; "papa is not at all particular."

"Thanks, you are very kind," he murmured, in deeper amazement.

"Are you coming or not?" she asked, knitting her eyebrows. "We can't keep Suleika here much longer," for the brown was fidgeting again.

"But are you going to lead her all the way home?"

"Can you ride?" she asked him abruptly.

"Yes," he said, with a smile.

"But can you ride well?—very well? For if you can, and if you have quite made up your mind about coming back with me, the simplest plan would be for you to ride Suleika home. Only I had better tell you that she has a particular dislike to strangers, and also she kicks dreadfully and sometimes rears. That is the way she threw Nicky to-day,

and you must know what a splendid seat he has."

Now it so happened that Mr Carbury was particularly vain of his horsemanship, and that of late years he had rather lacked opportunities for displaying it. While she was speaking he had been examining the unimpaired stirrup, and, before she had done her sentence, he had swung himself into the saddle. Suleika, taken by surprise, plunged rather violently, but, after a minute, settled down. The curious child on the pony looked pleased, and led the way down the avenue. Though he had not formally accepted the invitation, Mr Carbury, in mounting Suleika, had tacitly yielded.

"Are you very fond of riding?" asked his companion, as she watched him approvingly.

"I used to be."

"Then you ought to be so still, for you really ride very well. I don't suppose you could break a horse as well as Nicky does; but your hand is just what it ought to be."

Mr Carbury raised his hat with an air of mock gratification.

"If Suleika *should* throw you," she said presently, "your best plan will be to——"

"Get on again," he suggested, drily.

"Well, no; I think on the whole it would be wiser to make for the nearest tree. She is very savage at times with strangers."

As this reassuring piece of advice was uttered, the riders issued from between the trees and reached open ground. A great sweep of lawn lay before them, dotted with majestic beech-trees, which stood far apart and solitary, like kings that have turned hermits from weariness of the world. In the distance the green stretch was broken by the yet leafless woods, through whose depths the landscape-gardener's art had opened up many a delicious glimpse of softly rolling hills. To the left the ground fell away in gradual slopes; and somewhere far below and out of sight, the river was tinkling musically among the stones. And soon the house itself was disclosed — a tall, irregular, many-storeyed, many-gabled mansion. Bathed as it now stood in the evening sunshine, its long lines of terraces flooded with golden light, its

many panes all aflame with the dying beams, Kippendale promised indeed to afford pleasanter quarters than those which Mr Carbury had but half an hour ago been despondently contemplating. As they cantered across the velvet lawn, scattering the browsing sheep to the right and to the left, and drawing nearer to the hospitably open hall-door, even an unobservant man could not fail to be aware of the many little signs of care and comfort, without which a place of this description will always miss the seal of perfection. The costly shrubs, carefully netted against the voracious rabbit, the well-tended grass, the brilliant ribbon of crocuses with which even at this early season the edge of the lawn was picked out, the blaze of hyacinths behind the panes of the conservatory—all these were little things in themselves, yet they served to produce a whole. Mr Carbury did not scan these details; he was only vaguely aware that everything was in very good order and in very good style, and an undefined feeling of comfort began to take the place of his recent ill-humour. And when, just as the last glow

of sunset had died down in the west, they drew up under the stone porch, and Mr Carbury heard the crackle and saw the blaze of the welcome fire, whose light played along the seats and rugs of the entrance-hall, then the annoyance of his interrupted journey appeared to him in so very different a light, that he found himself mentally ejaculating, "I am glad that that crank-axle went wrong."

CHAPTER II.

A B C.

“Be your own palace, or the world’s your jail.”

“If there is one thing I object to more than another,” soliloquised Mr Carbury, as he glared at himself somewhat tragically in the glass, “it is being made a guy of. I wish I knew the name of Craigtoun’s tailor, in order to avoid him, and I wish I knew when Williams will turn up. Makes a fellow feel like something in a Christmas pantomime to be humps and bags all over this way ; I hope to goodness they haven’t got a houseful ! From all I know of them, I fancy they’re a quiet set.”

During the intervals of his unsatisfactory toilet, Mr Carbury had been ransacking his

memory for any scrap of information with regard to the family whose hospitality he found himself thus unexpectedly enjoying. He had the peerage pretty well at his finger-ends ; but Lord Kippendale never brought his family to town for the season, and the very nature of his political opinions was unknown, so there was little to fix them in the memory of such a thorough Londoner as was Mr Carbury. All that he could recall was that the present Lord Kippendale had succeeded his brother, who had died unmarried ; that there were one son and several daughters, one of whom was the wife of Nicholas Craigtoun, with whom he had been at college. Then, as his memory freshened, Mr Carbury recollected that whenever he had heard Lord Kippendale mentioned, it was as a " hard-riding Scotch peer," and M.F.H. in his county. Presently, in the midst of a tussle with his tie, another circumstance occurred to his mind ; he had heard this same hard-riding Scotch peer familiarly nicknamed " the Copper Earl," but whether as a skit upon his complexion, or as a reference to the source of his wealth, Mr Car-

bury was not sure. He vaguely inclined to the latter theory: "but there is no such thing as Scotch copper," next occurred to him as a passing thought; "Lord Kippendale must have land elsewhere. *Confound* the thing!" and, abandoning all dim speculations, Mr Carbury became absorbed in the more immediate necessities of the moment; for not only did the tie absolutely refuse to lie with that perfection of snowy smoothness which only Williams knew how to impart to it, but no amount of tugging and shifting could persuade Nicky's coat not to bulge up to Mr Carbury's ears, "And, by Jove!" sighed the harassed man, "I have always laboured under the impression that my limbs were fully as long as those of my neighbours, but there positively seems no end to Craigtoun's sleeve. It will be a mercy if they are not given to personal remarks in this house," and Mr Carbury made his way downstairs, grimly resolved to discourage the most distant approach to a smile by looking supremely and pointedly comfortable in Nicky's coat.

As yet he had only had a momentary glimpse

of his host, who had appeared to be very hospitable, but very muddy, and who had shaken his hand violently and told him that he was "verra welcome," for Lord Kippendale's accent was not above an occasional lapse into a genial breadth of vowel. Of the other members of the family, with the exception of "Nicky," he had seen nothing. As he was descending the wide staircase he heard some one, obviously a servant, apostrophising another in the depth of a passage with : "Have Lady Baby's tea-things been cleared away ?" Mr Carbury made an involuntary grimace, for children were his pet aversion. "So they deal in babies ? What a pity ! I hope they are kept out of the drawing-room." In the big entrance-hall, on which doors opened all round, a footman was trimming the fire. "The drawing-room ?" said Mr Carbury, at a loss for the right door. "Any one down yet ?" he asked, as the servant showed the way. "No one but Lady Baby, sir." Mr Carbury drew back apprehensively. "I asked the way to the drawing-room, not to the nursery," he muttered ; but the footman, with the ghost of a smile upon

his face, was holding the door open, and it was too late to retreat. The first big drawing-room was deserted, and would have been dark but for the shifting fire-light that made the crimson couches and hangings of the room look like bits out of a Rembrandt picture. Fitfully and fancifully a spot of bright gold alighted upon some polished surface, the corner of a gilt picture-frame, the bulging side of a china vase, or the round knob of a table-foot. Out of far-off dark corners bright objects twinkled dimly. The dreaded infant was not visible anywhere.

"I don't know a single fairy tale, and I have no sugar-plums in my pocket," sullenly thought Mr Carbury, as he lounged across the big room and cast a rather fearful glance into the next apartment. There was no infant here either, but a young lady in a white silk dress was standing on a footstool before a mirror, engaged in fastening a bunch of purple crocuses into the front of her bodice.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr Carbury, afraid that his appearance had startled her. She looked at him quite composedly in the mirror,

without turning her head or pausing in her arrangement of the flowers.

“Down already?”

The voice seemed familiar; but this only bewildered him, for he did not think that he had ever seen her before.

“Yes,” he said, rather pointlessly; “I am down.”

She turned round to look at him.

“What has made you so shy?”

“Nothing; I thought there was no one in the room—that is to say, I fancied there was a child here.”

“A child?”

“Yes, a baby; or so I understood.”

“Oh!” Her lips twitched for an instant; in the next she broke into a sudden, delicious, ringing laugh, and laughed for a full minute with her face hidden in her hands. But in the midst of it she drew up, as abruptly as she had begun, and stepped quite gravely off her footstool.

“I forgot you have had no introduction; but Lady Baby is quite used to introducing

herself," and as she stood before him in the fire-light, she dropped him a curtsy to the ground. At her words, Mr Carbury's blindness vanished. In the tone and gesture he had recognised his acquaintance of the green avenue.

It is rather a foolish name," she explained, as she came forward further into the light; "but we girls were all called 'Lady Baby' in turn, and as I was the last it stuck to me. Most likely it will stick to me for ever." And she heaved a sigh of aggrievement.

"Most likely," thought Mr Carbury, as he viewed her more closely. In spite of the respectable length of her white silk dinner-dress, which had evidently quite recently had the benefit of a let-down tuck, Lady Baby looked somehow as though she were only playing at being grown-up. Her slight figure wanted finish, though it was not without that grace which sometimes belongs to the very immaturity of early girlhood; her step, her glance, her smile, the roundness of her cheek, were still too evidently those of a child to satisfy a very severe critic of female loveliness; and yet the picture, such as

it was, was little short of charming. In some undefined way she reminded Mr Carbury of the April day which had just gone down in the west. Here also everything was promise, nothing fulfilment — everything was in bud, nothing in bloom. It was scarcely loveliness yet, but only a foreshadowing of loveliness which made her face sweet to look upon. In hair and complexion she was extremely fair, but her lashes were dark and sweeping, like those of a child, and in her blue eyes there shone that soft, dim, dewy lustre, which is like the first bloom on the flower, or like the last veil that still hangs between childhood's ignorance and life's realities. Her nose and chin were delicately pointed, which gave her an expression at once rebellious and imperious. Something of pride, too, there was in the curve of her short upper lip, and something of vehemence in the line of her deeply cut nostril. She looked like a child indeed, but like a child who has been used to have her own way and means to keep it; whose rosy finger-tips have not often felt a chastening stroke, whose free and fearless

glance knows nothing of the horror of penitential corners, and whose spirit has never quailed before such nursery tortures as dark cupboards and butterless bread to tea.

"She has not done growing yet," thought Mr Carbury, "and her hair is not used to being pulled up in that fashion : it won't lie still, and yet she is prettier than I thought she was ; but, bah ! I never cared for unripe fruit."

The lights had been brought meanwhile, and the rest of the party appeared.

Lord Kippendale was a short spare man of near seventy, with thin iron-grey locks and dead-white whiskers ; but the reassuring brick-red of his complexion, the vivacity of his manner, and the keen glance of his eye, virtually took twenty years off his age. He was one of those men who, without a spice of what is generally understood as bad temper, yet go through life in a state of irrepressible impatience. Everything moved too slowly for his taste, everybody was much too leisurely in their actions and too hesitating in their decisions. He was always looking at the clock

to see whether the next hour was not going to strike; not that he had anything particular to do in the next hour, but simply because some want in his nature was hurrying him continually over the present and pressing him towards the future. He was for ever wanting to be at "the next thing." As an uncivil friend had once observed, "Kippendale is like a kettle continually on the boil."

His two married daughters, who always passed the hunting season at Kippendale, were both present. The elder, Lady Agnes, whom Mr Carbury had once or twice met, was a large, meek, sleek woman, a little on the shady side of thirty, who, according to rules, ought to have been handsome, and who yet somehow managed to be almost plain. She possessed quite an array of charms, which catalogued upon paper would have sounded overwhelming. She had good solid teeth, looking as though they were cut out of the most stainless ivory; she had good solid hair, carved apparently out of solid gold, and heaped in a hillock on her neck; she had perfectly rounded arms, and a flawless com-

plexion. And yet she escaped being handsome, and conveyed only the impression of being genuine, and framed of the most sound and healthy, not to say expensive, materials. She rarely spoke except to agree with her husband, and yet more rarely acted except to obey him. If he was not at hand she would obey whoever else happened to be, *faute de mieux*. Round her throat Lady Agnes wore a single row of the very finest diamonds that Mr Carbury had ever seen except among crown jewels. Perhaps it was the great advantage to which they were displayed which chiefly attracted his attention. On Lady Agnes's neck they looked as though laid out for inspection on a well-padded white satin cushion.

Lady Catherine Blashford, the second daughter, a widow of some years' standing, was of the same slender type of figure as Lady Baby, being only somewhat taller,—for Lady Catherine had long since done growing,—and she had the very same wavy flaxen hair; but her features were sharper, and her complexion had begun to fade. She was pretty

still, in a way, pretty and disconsolate, and matters were so arranged about her that she would not have been pretty if she had not been disconsolate. It was the slight but suggestive disorder of her hair (no one had ever seen Lady Catherine's hair quite smooth), the droop at the corners of her mouth, and the appealing look in her eyes, always apparently on the point of filling with tears, which made her pretty. If she had been cheerful, she would have been quite commonplace. But nature had guarded against this by giving her an unlimited power of being disconsolate about anything or everything. She was capable of being unhappy about an ill-starched cuff, and of appearing inconsolable over a broken boot-lace.

"Nicky" Craigtoun, Lady Agnes's husband, was the only other member of the family present, for the son, Lord Germaine, was away from home. Craigtoun, as the borrower of Craigtoun's coat knew to his cost, was an abnormally big and abnormally broad-shouldered man, with the neck of a bull and the muscles of a gladiator. Regarded as a gladiator, he would,

no doubt, have come up to the mark ; but regarded as an English gentleman, he was somewhat less satisfactory. There was a suggestion of coarseness about his features, and people who saw him for the first time had a way of shrinking back nervously, as if expecting him to bite. But for this poor Nicky was not responsible ; it was the construction of his jaw which forced him to show his teeth, whether he wanted to bite or no, almost like a thorough-bred bulldog, which might, after all, be the best-natured creature in the world.

At dinner, where Mr Carbury found himself seated next to Lady Baby who presided with great composure at the head of the table, the subject of Nicky's fall formed the chief topic of conversation. Nicky himself sat by in sulky silence, for he was not used to having falls. Mr Carbury took little part in the talk ; there had been a time when he had liked to shine in conversation, but nowadays he did not care to exert himself so far. Besides, he was ruffled and preoccupied. Try as he would, he could not banish from his mind the consciousness of

those humps and bags which he had seen in the mirror up-stairs; he could not forget that there was a black cloth sausage rolled across his shoulders, and a white linen cavern shielding his chest; and when seated at table and engaged with his soup, he could not fail to be painfully reminded of the length of Craigtoun's arms as compared to his own. A shy man would perhaps have suffered more, at any rate he would have suffered differently; but though shyness was foreign to Mr Carbury's nature, there were other elements composing it which rendered the torture very exquisite indeed. While something in the construction of his mind made him acutely aware of every separate crease on each of his sleeves, something else made him morbidly dread his state of mind being detected; and this dread was only deepened by the instinctive and absolute conviction that all eyes were fixed upon his devoted person. The mixture of these sentiments produced a sort of gloomy defiance of attitude. Not for worlds would he have any one guess the depth of suffering which some

inches of superfluous cloth were capable of causing him.

Lady Baby, puzzled by this gloomy defiance, watched him furtively. She had made one or two vain attempts to draw him out. A discussion about railway accidents had failed to animate him; he exhibited supreme indifference as to politics; even the hunting-field, which Lady Baby generally considered infallible, had produced no effect.

"It is not shyness, certainly," she reflected, as she ate her soup. "I wonder if it is stupidity. I should like to know what his tastes are: he must have tastes. Ah, I have it! I shall put him through his alphabet."

This alphabetical system was one of Lady Baby's favourite resources in cases like the present. It consisted in choosing topics by the alphabet in steady progression; and it was generally to be counted on that somewhere about M or N, often even by C or D, some congenial subject was hit upon, which, so to say, floated the conversation.

"Have you ever been to Athens?" asked Lady Baby, turning to Mr Carbury.

"To Athens?" he answered, rousing himself.

"Oh yes; very often."

"What is it like?"

"Very like every other place; there are houses, and there are people. Some of the people have red caps, and most of the houses have flat roofs; but it isn't a bit more amusing than London, I assure you, only a little further off."

Lady Baby appeared to reflect for a moment, and then resumed.

"How do you like Miss Braddon's novels?"

"Miss Braddon?" repeated Mr Carbury, in some slight surprise at the change of topic. "I scarcely know, it is so long since I have read any."

"There are lots that I like better than hers," went on Lady Baby; "for instance, Ouida."

"You read Ouida?" said Mr Carbury, with just the ghost of a startled look upon his face.

"Of course I do, as fast as they appear. I

could read Ouida all day and all night. Couldn't you, Mr Carbury?"

Mr Carbury said that he didn't think he could.

"Then what could you read all night? Who is your favourite author? Don't you find novels interesting?"

"I am so tired of them," said Mr Carbury, indifferently; "they're all exactly alike."

Her face fell. "I am afraid he is not literary," she said to herself.

"Please tell me all you know about crocodiles," she presently began. "I hear there is one in the menagerie that is coming to the village next month. They are beginning to put up planks already, for it's to be a circus as well—a 'dramatic equestrian entertainment,' I believe, is what the playbills call it. I am so glad they have got a crocodile! In the last novel I read the hero was eaten by a crocodile in Egypt, and since then it has been one of my greatest wishes to see a crocodile."

"Really! I am afraid you will be disappointed. One can't quite fancy the Nile

without them ; but to look at they are nothing but an ugly lump of brown leather, not in the least interesting."

"Then you have been on the Nile? How exciting such travels must be!"

"Perhaps so," civilly assented Mr Carbury, not looking in the least excited.

"I have found him out now," thought Lady Baby; "he is a great traveller,—though, to be sure, he didn't seem to care much about Athens. He must be something, after all; everybody is something." Then aloud — "What other places have you been to?"

"Oh, a great many," said Mr Carbury abstractedly, for he was just then endeavouring furtively to hitch up his right sleeve to a more convenient angle.

"You will find it a comfort to get into your own coat again," said Lady Baby, catching sight of the manœuvre, and merely by way of saying something civil, for, to tell the truth, the deficiencies in Mr Carbury's attire had up to this moment passed completely unobserved by her.

"Oh, thanks," said Mr Carbury hastily, feeling this sympathetic notice to be just the last drop in his cup, "it doesn't in the least signify. The coat does very well," he added, with an extra touch of defiance. "You — you were asking about the places I had been to?"

"Yes; you seem to have travelled a great deal. I think you English travel more than we Scotch. There are some of the people in this county who have never even been over the Border, and yet we are within a drive of England, you know. By the by, you *are* English, are you not?"

"Yes, I *am* English," he answered, with a rather more violent emphasis than the occasion seemed to demand. "What else did you take me for?"

"Oh, I don't know. My first idea was that you might be a Frenchman or an Italian; but when I saw you catch that horse, I felt pretty sure you could not be a foreigner."

"Really!" Mr Carbury flushed with what seemed to be annoyance, while at the same time he laughed with what might have been

gratification; but the laugh was forced, and annoyance evidently had the upper hand.

"No," thought Lady Baby, "he is not an enthusiastic traveller, and he certainly is very touchy, though I can't make out what it is about. I wonder what would be a safe subject? Let me see. Where am I in the alphabet? If he does not care for crocodiles, I am afraid dragons will not do, nor ducks, nor dolphins; devils might have a better chance, but I can't use bad language at table on account of the servants' morals." Her eyes wandered round the table in search of a subject, and by chance they alighted on the diamond necklace which her sister wore. Mr Carbury happened to be looking in the same direction.

"You are looking at Agnes's diamonds," said Lady Baby; "are you a judge of diamonds?"

"Well, no; one can't help getting rather bored with diamonds after a time; they are such aggressive things. Your sister's are very fine stones," he added, as a sort of reparation for his too obvious indifference.

"They are fine, but they are not my sister's."

“Whose, then?”

“They will belong to Germaine’s wife, my brother, you know; but he is not married yet, so Agnes wears them in the meantime. They have a history too, quite a tragical history. Do you like tragical histories, Mr Carbury?”

“I don’t mind them.”

“Well, then, thirty years ago, when papa’s brother was still alive——”

“Baby!” interrupted Lady Catherine, “you are not going to tell that story now, surely?”

“Frances!” said Lord Kippendale, across the table, “I beg you to recollect!” and he glanced significantly towards the servants.

“Oh well, I forgot,” said Lady Baby, colouring; “it will do as well at dessert. Can you wait till dessert, Mr Carbury?”

“I will try,” he said, with his jaded smile. Some dim and far-off recollection had awakened in his mind; something about a diamond robbery in connection with the Bevan family, which had made a sensation at the time. He could not remember what the circumstances had been, but he knew that they had been

peculiar. At any rate, he felt quite able to hold out till dessert, or possibly till Doomsday, without ascertaining the details of the story. Sensational robberies were quite a commonplace, and he was very tired of diamonds.

But by dessert-time Lady Baby had forgotten about the promised story, for another topic had arisen. Just as she was casting about for her next alphabetical subject, and hesitating between the rival merits of Esquimaux and earthquakes, her sister Catherine unconsciously came to her aid by observing, in a tone of most becoming dejection—

“What on earth am I to say in answer to Maud Epperton’s letter?” The appeal was made to no one in particular, but to every one in general, and her pretty helpless eyes wandered from face to face, as though in search of advice.

“That will do for E,” thought Lady Baby; “it is better than either Esquimaux or earthquakes.”

“Do you know Miss Epperton?” she asked Mr Carbury.

He looked almost amused. "I should think I do. One can't help knowing Miss Epperton."

"Do you know her as well as Athens, and crocodiles, and the Nile?" she asked, with unconscious irony.

Instantly the cloud descended again on Mr Carbury's face. "I know her pretty well," he said stiffly, eyeing Lady Baby somewhat askance. Could it be possible—no, surely it could not be possible—that the child was making fun of him?

"She is very fond of country life, is she not?"

"Country-house life, I daresay, yes."

"And very glad to get away from town life when she can?"

"There is a town called London that she is very glad to get to when she has a chance."

"But she doesn't talk as if she cared about London much, and she must be fond of the country—she says so in her letter to Catherine this morning. Catherine is the only one of us who knows her. She wants to come here."

"Miss Epperton wants to come to Scotland

now?” asked Mr Carbury, with the first genuine interest he had shown that day; “surely you must be mistaken. Why, I have not known her miss a season for years.”

“I knew it!” cried Lady Catherine, who scented a grievance on the instant. “I have only met her once or twice at Bournemouth, but I felt quite sure she was a worldly creature; and what are we to do with a worldly creature at Kippendale? I wish some one would tell me how to answer her letter!”

“Why, say ‘Yes,’ of course,” broke in Lord Kippendale, taking up the question of the moment rather hotly, as was his wont. “And, for goodness’ sake, say it in as few words and as few minutes as you can. Don’t take an hour to make up your mind on which part of the page you’ll begin. Eh? What’s wrong? Any more difficulties? For goodness’ sake, let us consider the matter settled.”

“But, papa, please don’t be so dreadfully cheerful about it,” pleaded poor Lady Catherine; “don’t you hear that she is just wild about gaiety, and we have none to give her? I can’t

imagine why she is coming. Does she ride, Mr Carbury?"

Mr Carbury was quite sure that she didn't ride.

"If she doesn't ride," pronounced Nicky, with oracular decision, "she will be a bore;" and Lady Agnes, considering that she had received her orders, immediately began to regard Miss Epperton as a bore.

"If she doesn't ride," remarked Lady Baby, "it won't be easy to amuse her. She can feed the horses if she likes, and take the puppies out for exercise, and I can show her the kennels; it is all I can do for her. But I hope she will come all the same, for I want to see a regular fashionable girl."

"Of course she will come," said Lord Kippendale, decisively; "what is the use of wasting words over it? Why, Kate, lass, where are your notions of Scotch hospitality? For goodness' sake, why shouldn't the poor girl come if she has a fancy for rest and change? Isn't that the way she puts it in her letter, eh? There's nothing to blether or haver over that I can see. Let's

consider the point settled, and get on to the next thing. Will you pass me the figs, Craigtoun?"

"She will turn the whole house inside out," sighed Catherine, softly. "I know she will."

"Why shouldn't she come?" reflected Mr Carbury. "Yes; but why *should* she come? She has taken her aim, no doubt; but I confess I don't see the mark this time."

Mr Carbury was puzzled. For more than half-a-dozen—in fact, it was nearer a dozen—years past, Miss Epperton had been one of the standing features of London society. Mr Carbury had met her more times than he had memory for,—in drawing-rooms, in theatres, in the Park, at kettle-drums, and at Academy openings. He had passed her on crowded staircases at night, and come across her at morning concerts. Many a polo-match had he watched with her at Hurlingham, and many a lobster-salad had he handed up to her at race-day luncheons. He knew what she was like in her winter furs, and how she looked in summer muslins. He had shaken hands with her some thousands of times, in some thousand different

situations ; he had walked with her, danced with her, flirted with her, and admired her ; but he had never been in love with her, even in the slightest degree. Perhaps for this reason they had been all the better friends ; for every one knew that Miss Epperton could marry only a rich man, and every one knew also that Mr Carbury was not rich, or at least not rich enough. That a girl whose sole object in life was understood to be the securing of a husband with an establishment, should of her own free will come to bury herself in Scotland, just as the season was beginning to wax towards its glory,—this appeared to Mr Carbury to cry very loudly for explanation. Even after he found himself in the solitude of his room that night, his mind continued to run with a sort of vague wonder upon the question of Miss Epperton's motive. That she had a motive, was as certain as that two added to two produces the sum of four. He had never known her do the most trivial act without a motive, and he had known her long. As regards that idyllic yearning after rustic repose before mentioned, Mr

Carbury, figuratively speaking, snapped his fingers at it.

"But who can it be?" he argued, as, having dismissed Williams, he lay back luxuriously in an easy-chair, before the still smouldering fire. "She is certainly coming down here after somebody. *Cherchons l'homme*, by way of a change. It can't be Lord Germaine, for he is a boy, six years her junior, I should think; and besides, it is not likely they have ever met. I don't think she is quite desperate enough yet to try her hand on the old man. It can't be me, because I am not supposed to be here, and then she is too clever not to know that I see through her. Oh no! I am safe. After an acquaintance of such long standing, we are not likely to make any mistakes about each other."

"Long, very long," he muttered presently, "a great many years. I am getting old. Heavens! how out of date I felt while that child was chattering away to me! She can't be more than sixteen, I imagine—sixteen at the outside."

He remained for a minute staring fixedly into

the fire. His thoughts had taken another turn ; he was troubling himself no longer about Miss Epperton and her motive. After a minute he rose and walked slowly towards the toilet-table, then stood still and gazed abstractedly at his reflection in the glass.

It was the face of a world-worn man, worn before his time. Years, no doubt, had something to do with that sunken look about his temples and those deeply ploughed lines about his mouth, but years alone could not have done it. Of good looks, strictly speaking, there remained but the gauntest and grimmest of wrecks ; but something in the type of his countenance, or the cut of his deepset eyes, or the turn of his head, or the carriage of his tall figure, made it absolutely impossible for him to go through life unnoticed, even had he so wished it. He did not happen to wish it very much, and though there were moments when he resented this notice, he would probably have found its cessation far the greater trial of the two.

Rather peculiar circumstances had surrounded his childhood. Strange though it may sound,

boundless unselfishness and bottomless good-nature—not his own—had been his undoing. Good luck or bad luck had fated him to grow up the centre-piece of an admiring circle of sisters, all his seniors, and all—so also a freakish fate would have it—as remarkable for their uniform plainness of feature as he was for the somewhat showy style of his good looks. What might yet have been wanting to put the crown to the work was supplied by the injudicious tenderness of a widowed mother, to whom this late-born, brilliant boy quite outweighed his three colourless and featureless sisters. In her eyes, as well as in those of the ungrudging sisters, his mere existence was a standing credit to the family, and everything which could make that existence smoother and pleasanter, even only by a shade, it was no more than the family's duty to procure. Upon this principle, therefore, his education was conducted, and in this way a positive mania of egotism was scientifically fed up, and vanity was nursed with as tender a care as though it had been the most precious and delicate of hothouse plants, and answered so

well to the nursing, that soon, with its stealthily spreading roots, and with its luxuriant tendrils, it strangled, one by one, every single seed of good which tried to live within him. The showy style of looks clung to him, even after boyhood's bloom was gone. If a clear olive skin and a pair of very remarkable black eyebrows could do it, the man Carbury was no less a credit to his family than the child Carbury had been. The family, at least, continued to think so, despite a certain sprinkling of hostile remarks; for this particular class of good looks, though it met with universal notice, did not meet with universal approval, and, though it always made people stare, did not always make them admire. While something about him appealed to the imagination of the fair sex, this same something seemed to provoke the criticism—or perhaps it was the jealousy—of his brother men. Women described his appearance as “romantic,” men as “operatic.” One man had been heard to compare him to “an Italian baritone, masquerading in plain clothes,” but that man had been of stumpy build and of flabby complexion.

Carbury's own mental attitude towards his own looks was of the most complex. He was vain of them, with a sort of sneaking vanity which dreaded detection as morbidly as it feared ridicule, but which nevertheless was very intense. Their possession caused him as much anxiety as satisfaction. In any case the consciousness of their existence was, in one shape or another, seldom absent from his mind. His personal tastes were of the most cultured and fastidious, and it is quite possible that in any one else he would have found that it was almost too gaudy, scarcely good style in fact, to have eyebrows so broadly marked that they might have been laid on with chalk, or such very brilliantly white teeth, or such very aggressively black hair, that lay about his temples in the thickest of jetty waves. It was all just a trifle overpowering ; it wanted distance, it almost wanted footlights. On occasion it would have been all very well, but the display of all this holiday style of beauty was too much for the week-day life of this workaday world. No one felt this latter truth more than the admiring

family circle. Work ! It was not to be thought of ; he was a great deal too ornamental to be allowed even to dream of making himself useful. He might leave that to the plain people. And he did leave it to the plain people, though not without a few, a very few, uncertain efforts at resistance, born of some faint feeling of shame, or of some fibre of healthy ambition which had miraculously survived within him. It was wasted pains. He had no chance against the demoralising atmosphere of self-sacrifice which surrounded him ; and, giving up the unequal struggle, he let his arms sink to his sides, and resigned himself to a life of idleness. But even idleness, unless accompanied by imbecility or sickliness, must take some shape. A man in full possession of his mental powers, and of a physically vigorous youth, must either work or play. Since he was not suffered to work, and since, after all, there are twenty-four hours to be filled up in the day, Carbury took to play of all sorts. Society came first, varied by a very free pursuit of equestrian and field sports. These latter he cultivated assiduously, not only

because, at that time of his life, he enjoyed them very keenly, but also because of some instinctive conviction that to prove himself ostentatiously British in this respect would be the best refutation of the Italian baritone idea, of which all the time he was angrily conscious. But he soon grew tired of that which he drank of in such full and unchecked draughts; and then he tried Art, and then he tried books, and he tried dice, and he tried politics. The wildest romance and the driest science were all experimented upon; and when these too had palled, travelling had its turn, to the ineffable grief of his sisters, who worked their fingers sore in equipping him for his wanderings as no traveller had ever before been equipped, and who knitted thick vests for the cold countries, and sewed muslin scarves for the hot countries, as well as they could see for the tears that dimmed the stitches. But the novelty of travelling wore off, like the novelty of everything else, and he returned home, to find that the interests which he had left because they tasted so flat only tasted rather flatter for the spell of

disuse. And meantime his fortune had melted and his youth had faded, and Laurence Carbury found himself a worn-out man on the verge of forty, sick to death of the world in which he moved, yet finding it intolerable to move in any other; sick to death of life itself, with a withered face which many suns had tanned and many passions deeply marked, and with eyes that had grown almost as irresponsive as dimmed and blinded mirrors, worn away, as it were, by the many things that have been reflected on their surface,—the many landscapes and cities and flowers and trees, the many beautiful pictures, and the many beautiful women that had cast their images there. Such as he was even now, he was a man whom few people passed without turning their heads to take another look at, or asking instinctively, "Who is he?" In his way he was almost as striking as in the days when he had uneasily wondered whether, after all, his teeth were not a shade too white, and his hair a shade too black. Too black! Ah, well! time had altered that at any rate; but even his hair had not turned grey as

other people's do ; and the faint silver sprinkling, contrasting with the black of his eyebrows, altered the character of his face without making it less remarkable.

The fortunes of his mother and his three sisters (who had all remained unmarried) were virtually at his disposal ; and this, together with the wrecks of his own, enabled him to live in comfort, even comparative luxury ; so it can scarcely be said that he palpably missed the money he had squandered. Every interest and instinct within him was deadened, except the instinct of that insensate egotism which coloured for him every inch of the world. Seldom, very seldom nowadays, was he visited by any of those self-questionings which had disturbed his youthful mind. Only now and then, at very rare intervals, something like the far-off echo of a voice would faintly stir some shadowy feeling of regret for his wasted life ; sometimes, as to-night, the sight of a very young face, or the radiant innocence of a pair of blue eyes, would touch him, as the memory of the first spring day touches those that stand in mid-autumn ;

and in those moments even his supreme self would totter, and his soul within him would cry rebelliously—"O God! (if there be a God) can I have done well? Can this be the whole of life? Is there not something beyond?"

But those moments were few and far between; the mood was wont to pass rapidly, and it passed rapidly now. As he turned from the glass, it wanted no more than the chance sight of Nicky's coat, hanging over a chair-back, to change the current of his thoughts; and instead of his wasted life, it was the galling recollection of his recent appearance in that garment, which formed Mr Carbury's last waking thought that night.

CHAPTER III.

A BORDER RAID.

“England and us have been lang at feud.”

LORD KIPPENDALE's hatred of anything in the shape of procrastination, and his anxiety to be at “the next thing,” led to Miss Epperton's appearance at Kippendale only two days after the reception of her letter. The train which brought her from the south arrived a little later in the day than the one by which Mr Carbury had found himself left stranded, but it jogged along at just the same easy pace. Miss Epperton did not lean back in her corner with closed eyes as Mr Carbury had done ; for, in the first place, it was a third-class carriage, and the corner was not a tempting one for lounging in ; and, in the

second place, she had discovered that her glove wanted mending, and it would take her all her remaining time to put in the needful stitches. A torn glove would have accorded ill with the perfect neatness of the travelling-cloak which fitted close to her slim and elegant figure, or with the faultless sit of the plain black hat which surmounted her shining braids of hair. An uncharitably keen-eyed person might have pointed out that the cloak had certainly been turned, and that the hat had probably been reshaped more than once; but, to the ordinary observer, the things were worn with a certain easy grace that disarmed criticism.

In the intervals of stitching her glove, Miss Epperton took a delicate sniff at her bottle of salts. She was not alone in the carriage. A noisy farmer and a snuff-taking mechanic occupied the further end of the compartment; for Miss Epperton had been unable to spare the necessary half-crown tip for the guard. Her head was aching a little, and every tone of the farmer's bucolic roar went through it like a knife; but she looked neither morose nor sour.

She only looked very tired, and at the same time sensibly and courageously resigned to her fate.

As they neared the station—the glove by this time being rebuttoned—she took down her bag and small bundle of wraps from the net, and then, catching sight of the footman on the platform, she drew sharply back until they had glided past him. In the next minute the passengers were descending, and while the footman made a rush for the first-class carriages, Miss Epperton, deftly gathering up her slender hand-baggage, leapt lightly to the ground, and presently James, looking about him in bewilderment for the tall, dark, young lady who had been described to him, became aware that the very young lady required was standing calmly and coolly on the platform, with her bag by her side.

“From Kippendale?” she said suavely. “You missed me, I suppose; my box is in the van.”

The whole little manœuvre was executed with an ease and a neatness which spoke of

long practice; and after all, it was not in the least necessary that James should know by what class this new visitor had travelled.

When Miss Epperton alighted at the door, and for the first time set foot on the threshold of Kippendale House—and it turned out later to have been a memorable day—the whole party happened to be gathered together in the entrance-hall, knocking the balls about the billiard-table which stood in the centre.

“We are not all strangers,” said Lady Baby, doing the honours of the house, when the first flurry of introduction and greeting was over; “there is some one else here whom you know besides Catherine,—a friend of yours. He has only been here two days.”

“A friend of mine?” repeated Miss Epperton, in an extremely melodious voice, as she turned expectantly towards the dark corner where Mr Carbury was putting away the billiard-cues.

“An old friend, Miss Epperton,” said he, advancing to shake hands with her, and watching with a sort of languid curiosity to see what effect the sight of him would have upon her.

It did not seem agreeable. The expectant light on her face vanished, and in its place came a look of vexation, swift but unmistakable.

"Oh, Mr Carbury, of course ; but I did not know you were in Scotland. Is not this rather hard upon London ?"

"Scarcely as hard as your absence will be, Miss Epperton."

She bit her lip, and then said hurriedly, "It is quite a pleasant surprise to see you."

"Surprising it may be, but pleasant it is not," thought Mr Carbury, as he noted her forced smile. "What your little game is, my fair husband-hunter, I do not know ; but it is quite evident that you would rather have played it without any 'old friend' looking on. She expected to see some one else when she turned ; I was distinctly a disappointment : well, time will show ! I almost hope they will keep me on here to see the sport."

And there seemed every prospect of his being "kept on." There was no question yet as to his resuming his interrupted journey. Since, as he confessed, he had nothing particular to

do in London, there was no reason for hurrying south. The fact of his being an acquaintance of Nicky's seemed sufficient recommendation for his social character, in Lady Baby's eyes at least, whose will ruled the household, and who looked up to Nicky with enthusiastic admiration, as to a wonderful elder brother whose power of muscle would have been sufficient to tame anything that could be saddled and bridled, short perhaps of a zebra. As for Lord Kippendale, as soon as he had seen Mr Carbury sit on horseback and take a fence, he refused to hear an immediate departure spoken of, and insisted on considering a long visit to Kippendale as a thing sealed and settled, over which neither time nor words need be wasted.

It was well that Mr Carbury's curiosity was more of a desultory than of a devouring sort, for during the first forty-eight hours, neither Miss Epperton's manner nor conversation afforded the slightest clue to the possible motive of her visit. To all appearances it was neither more nor less than the harmless desire for change of air spoken of in her letter. That

dangerous thirst for amusement, of which Lady Catherine had talked with such apprehension, had as yet not showed itself. There were no symptoms whatever of the house being turned either upside down or inside out. She was a trifle pale, a trifle languid, quite unobtrusive, and even easily amused ; equally ready to feed the horses or to join Lady Baby in taking two young and very foolish foxhound puppies out for their daily exercise, and helping to control their vagrant and unsteady conduct.

"I can't make it out at all," said Lady Catherine, much distressed at seeing everything go so smoothly ; "I have always heard that she is thoroughly worldly, and there she was yesterday helping to plan the arrangement of the annuals in the flower-garden, just as though she were really fond of flowers. I thought she was going to be supercilious and disagreeable, and make us all feel uncomfortable."

"Cheer up, Kate," said Lady Baby, laughing ; "she may make us all very unhappy yet. It is the vocation of all the handsome dark people in

the world to make all the plain fair ones unhappy; they do it in every novel. And, O Kate! *isn't* she beautiful?"

Lady Baby's own beauty belonging to the fair and irregular order, led her passionately to admire all dark and regular beauties, and at the very instant of their meeting she had decided that Miss Epperton's face was far the most beautiful thing she had ever seen in her life. As a piece of delicate and almost pathetic pallor, the face, indeed, when seen in a favourable light and at a favourable moment, was one which might well have enchained the fancy of a severer critic than Lady Baby. Searching daylight was apt to reveal marks of wear about the eyes and mouth, just as sharp-eyed people might detect the same marks about her hats and gowns; and when the searching daylight was ungallant enough to lend its aid to the sharp-eyed people, then not only the marks of wear became revealed, but also the efforts which had been made to repair them. But of this Lady Baby noticed nothing; indeed it is probable that such a thing as *poudre de riz*

was not even known to her by sight. She saw only that Maud Epperton had the most beautiful dark eyes and the most beautiful dark hair, so dark that it might have been taken for black except for a certain luminous warmth shed over it, and for the rich depth of its shades, richer and deeper than the shades which even the most magnificent black hair can ever boast of. And in a vague way Lady Baby felt too that her new friend was not only to be admired but was also to be pitied ; that though her eyes were so beautiful they were not peaceful, and though her smile was so brilliant it was not happy, and the awe she had expected to feel of "the regular fashionable girl," was softened into something more like sympathetic interest.

It was on the third day of Miss Epperton's visit that Mr Carbury's curiosity got its first taste of satisfaction. Strolling up to the tea-table that afternoon, he found Lady Baby serving out, together with the bread-and-butter, various items of information concerning their neighbours in the county ; from which Mr Car-

bury concluded that Miss Epperton, who was sitting by in a listening attitude, had deemed it time to show some active interest in her surroundings.

“And then there are the Frazers,” Lady Baby was saying as Mr Carbury came up; “but they are always either ill or gone abroad to get well. And then there are the Smarts—seven girls, I think, or is it eight?”

“Oh,” said Miss Epperton, rather blankly, “you don’t seem to be very lucky in neighbours. And are all the people who have not got seven daughters, or who are not gone abroad to get well, out of driving distance?”

“All those in the county are—though there is another place over the Border which is quite within reach as far as distance goes; but—we don’t go there much.”

“Dont you?” Miss Epperton looked up for a moment from her work. This subject seemed to interest her more than the seven Miss Smarts had done. “I should have thought that in the country any neighbours within reasonable distance——”

"Yes ; but the Wyndhursts are not like usual neighbours. We — don't get on with them."

"That means that they don't ride, or don't sit straight in their saddles, I suppose," suggested Miss Epperton, with a smile.

"Oh, but they *do* ride !" exclaimed the three sisters simultaneously. "They ride very much indeed, and sit very straight," added Lady Baby, in the tone of one who intends to deal justice even to her foes.

"Then what can their shortcomings be ?"

"Oh, nothing particular ; only, don't you see, it is just because they *do* ride, and are so awfully conceited about it, and always look out for the biggest fences, especially when any of us are behind them, and think they know more about breeding thorough-breds than papa does (which of course is absurd), or breaking horses than Nicky does (ridiculous idea !). That is why we don't get on," said Lady Baby, simply ; "and besides, we are Scotch Borderers, you know, and they are English Borderers. It is quite impossible that we should get on just like other

people. In fact, we haven't got on for the last five hundred years, ever since the first Wyndhurst set fire to the first Bevan's haystack; for I am quite sure they began."

Miss Epperton sat silent, thoughtfully putting stitches into a very modest and unostentatious strip of white embroidery. No one from her expression would have guessed that she had met with a check in the first move she had played since her arrival at Kippendale, and was considering how to circumvent the unexpected obstacle.

It will be as well to explain here that Lady Baby's speech had very correctly sketched the state of feeling which existed between the Scotch family of Bevan and the English family of Wyndhurst. They met rarely, except in the hunting-field, and, when there, found the keenest enjoyment in eclipsing each other's achievements. Such similarity of tastes as they possessed could only produce either firm friendship or hot rivalry, and in this case some traditional remnant of an ancient Border-feud had perhaps determined for the latter. Since the death of Sir Anthony

Wyndhurst, somewhat more than two years ago, the heat of the rivalry had slightly flagged, for the only Wyndhursts in the hunting-field had been three or four small boys on tiny shaggy ponies, who used to disappear, pony and all, into deep ditches, and reappear again on the other side with a spirit and pertinacity which a Bevan could not but admire, even in a Wyndhurst. Sir Anthony had left another son, considerably older than these sporting mites; for he had been twice married, and his heir was the only child by the first marriage. This young man, the present baronet, was not known, except distantly by sight, to the Bevans, for they had never come across him in the hunting-field, the most natural place for a Bevan to meet a Wyndhurst. He was generally away from home: he liked yachting, and it was understood that he was delicate. Perhaps sea-air suited him; or perhaps, as was sometimes hinted, his stepmother's society did not particularly suit him. Those who knew his stepmother best appeared to think this supposition not impossible. But even in Sir Anthony's

lifetime the eldest son had rarely been at home ; nor was he talked of and made much of, as eldest sons, be they absent or present, generally are in the conversation of their fond relations. It had almost seemed as if Sir Anthony were not particularly proud of his heir, over whom some unknown cloud seemed mysteriously to brood. People had gone so far as to suggest a want of intellect, or a hump, or a crime, as explanations of the mystery ; but nothing was positively ascertained.

“By the by,” said Lady Baby, presently, “talking of the Wyndhursts, Nicky told me yesterday that Sir Peter is on his way home at last. It is a positive mercy, on account of next year’s hunting. Poor papa was getting quite low at no longer having Sir Anthony to eclipse.”

Sir Peter was the present baronet, who had never been home, except on flying visits, since his succession to the title.

“He did not seem in a particular hurry to get home when I saw him last week in London,” said Miss Epperton, without looking up from her work.

"In London? Has he got as far as London? And you know him? What is he like?"

"He is very quiet and rather silent, and—and really nothing else very particular, except that he is something of an artist. He has a portfolio full of sunrises done at sea, and another full of sunsets."

"I don't care for landscapes," said Lady Baby; "does he never paint faces?"

"Yes; he takes portraits too: he is a sort of general dabbler in art. He took quite a gallery of portraits when he was in London last month.

"And you figure in the gallery?" suggested Mr Carbury, as she hesitated, and he began to see a glimmer of Miss Epperton's plans.

"Yes," she said quietly, and she looked Mr Carbury full in the face; "Sir Peter painted me in costume. He wanted some one very colourless and very tall, for a study of Clytemnestra, and so I sat to him. By the by, have you decided about the blue lobelia in the flower-garden?"

The name of Wyndhurst was not mentioned again till that evening after dinner; and then,

quite accidentally it seemed, the subject came up again. Lord Kippendale, who liked a decent excuse for his after-dinner snooze, had asked for some music. Catherine had gone to the piano and was singing the "Pibroch of Donald Dhu," in a feebly pretty voice, not by any means calculated to induce even the most loyal of Scots to "hark to the summons." Maud Epperton, however, must have been moved by the appeal, for by-and-by she left her seat, and drawing nearer to the piano, began to turn over some books of songs that were piled on a chair.

"I am sure you must find our music dreadfully barbarous," said Catherine, as she touched the last chord, and speaking in the deprecating tone in which she generally addressed Miss Epperton. "I am so sorry we can't entertain you better, and I suppose you have heard all the good singers in London; but——"

"Indeed I have not," said Maud, good-humouredly, "and I think a touch of barbarism is quite refreshing after all the "Good nights" and "Farewells" we get in English drawing-rooms. But, do you know, these volumes here are

a revelation to me. I did not know the whole musical world contained as many Scotch songs as I have already found on this one chair. I see you have got some of the Border ballads put to music ; do you sing any of them ?”

Catherine confessed to singing a few of them, only she was not sure of the accompaniments, and Maud, whose fancy seemed to be caught by something about the Border ballads, offered to accompany her ; and thus many pages were turned over, and many verses deciphered, and Maud carefully examined the quaint old engravings which illustrated some of the Border songs. Presently one particular engraving appeared to have fixed her attention. It was the rude representation of a gigantic oak, with a gaping trunk, and one huge leafless branch stretching gauntly and weirdly from out of a mass of leafy boughs, and with the sufficiently startling inscription : “The Gibbet-tree at Nolesworth Castle.”

“And what is the story of *this* ?” asked Maud ; “this tree can’t possibly help having a story.”

"Oh, the story is quite simple," said Lady Baby, who had joined the group at the piano; "it is the tree on which one of the Wyndhursts had the impertinence to hang one of the Bevans a few hundred years ago, and the branch on which they hung him very properly never bore leaves again. It is exactly what one would expect of any respectable oak."

"Hang!" repeated Maud, rather staggered.

"Yes; though of course they did it in the night, and denied it afterwards. Wasn't it an awful shame? Instead of running him through with a lance, or knocking him on the head with an axe in the proper way."

"But why had he to be killed at all?"

"Oh, well, you see, he had cut off two of the young Wyndhursts' heads and brought them to Scotland, which, of course, irritated them a good deal. And even before that they were always persecuting him. Once they even made such a fuss that they got our own Warden to lock him up, and that was all about some stupid cows or sheep that they had not looked after properly."

"I am afraid I don't quite understand," said Maud ; " did the cows and sheep——"

"We took them, of course, don't you see?"

"Took them?"

"Yes ; carried them off. Haven't you noticed the wall round the flower-garden ? That was the place where we used to shut up the Wyndhursts' cattle, for fear of their getting back again, and the wall is still part of the old one. I assure you there was nothing in the least odd about it : it was the custom of the time ; and besides, they always took *our* cattle whenever they could get them. It was perfectly fair play ; don't you understand ?"

"Give her time," said Mr Carbury, who also had come up ; "you see these facts are just a shade startling to effeminate Southerners like Miss Epperton and myself. Bear with us, please : consider that we have not been brought up in Border lore."

"Oh, but you must not believe half that Frances says," broke in Lady Catherine ; "most of the tales are mere traditions, and most likely nobody was ever hanged upon that tree,—and

people have just invented stories to account for the barren branch."

"At any rate the branch is there, if it has to be accounted for," said Maud, who had been deeply engrossed with the verses meanwhile. "If the tree is at all like its portrait, it must be well worth seeing, whether it ever served as a gibbet or not. Why, its trunk is a perfect cavern!"

"Do you mean that you would really care to see it?" said Catherine, eagerly, feeling only too happy to have hit upon anything which could keep this dangerously worldly creature amused, and gazing at Maud as one might gaze at some half-tamed ferocious animal, in whom an outbreak is momentarily to be expected. "Frances, don't you think that, if it would really amuse Miss Epperton to see the 'gibbet-tree,' perhaps papa might not mind, for once in a way, on the show-day, you know—for Nolesworth is quite a show-place," she explained, turning to Maud; "the outer park is open to visitors twice a week."

"Oh!" cried Maud, in mock alarm, "I could never forgive myself if I were to be the cause of

a renewal of hostilities. Should we have to go armed to the teeth?"

"It would be the proper way of conducting a Border raid," remarked Mr Carbury, drily.

"Border raid? eh? what?" broke in Lord Kippendale, waking up at that moment, and very anxious to slur over the fact that he had ever been asleep, for which reason he threw himself warmly into the discussion. "Miss Epperton anxious to see the gibbet-tree? Eh? Is that so, Miss Epperton?"

"Well," said Maud, with a laugh, "I confess to having rather lost my heart to the gibbet-tree. But of course I shall stifle my yearning, if there are such difficulties in the way; your daughters seem afraid——"

"Afraid!" broke in Lady Baby, scornfully. "We are not a bit afraid; we never have been afraid of any Wyndhurst, so why should we begin now? Papa, don't you think we might go?"

A very little more discussion now settled the point. Everything unconsciously was

shaping itself towards the fulfilment of Miss Epperton's wish.

Lady Baby was indignant at the imputation thrown out; Lady Catherine was anxious that Miss Epperton should be amused, and seemed inclined to view the gibbet-tree in the light of a quieting sop to be thrown to the dangerous animal; Lord Kippendale was not only hospitably ready to gratify any wish even hinted at by any guest residing under his roof, but also laboured under an intense dislike to postponing, even by one unnecessary hour, the execution of any resolve once arrived at; and between all these various influences, it was decided, before they parted for the night, that, as next day happened to be a show-day, Nolesworth Castle should without further delay be visited.

"The Wyndhursts are not back, are they?" asked Lord Kippendale while the candles were being lit in the hall. But none of the family knew anything of the Wyndhursts' movements, and Maud said nothing, but kept her eyes bent on the candle which Mr Carbury was

lighting for her; so Lord Kippendale answered his own question by concluding that they were sure not to have left London yet. "Besides we don't bite when we meet, you know, Miss Epperton; you must not think that there are no such things as manners on the Borders: we are very civil, I can tell you; it's only that there's no love lost."

"So the raid is resolved on," said Carbury, in a low voice, as he handed Maud the candle.

"Yes, the raid is resolved on," and she met his mocking gaze unflinchingly. "Are you to be of the invaders?"

"Undoubtedly; I might be useful in helping to carry off the booty."

"The booty!" said Maud, as she calmly gave him her hand for good night; "the booty will I daresay be quite transportable, even without your aid."

"D—— her pluck!" remarked Mr Carbury to himself as he walked up-stairs, "and d—— her cleverness; she deserves to succeed."

Next day was dull and the afternoon was

damp, and looked almost as if it might in time be wet; not at all the sort of day for seeing a show-place to advantage. "But it is all the better not to have too bright a day," said Miss Epperton, when, after some hesitation, it was finally decided to risk the chance of a shower; "at least we shall have the tree all to ourselves."

Nolesworth Castle was a far more impressive building and a far more important place than Kippendale, and in its features it had much more rigidly preserved its ancient character of a Border mansion.

While successive Kippendales had added to and altered their ancestral abode until the rugged old "keep" had gradually become transformed into a picturesque and homelike jumble of gables and excrescences, which, though it might irritate an antiquarian and madden an architect, was yet a most cheering sight to the ordinary visitor, Nolesworth Castle still stretched the same stony wings and reared the same forbidding towers that had loomed *and* frowned thus for centuries. And while

the Kippendales had filled up and planted with flowers the moat that was no longer threatened, and had light-heartedly thinned out the woods that were no longer required as convenient hiding-places, the English Border-castle had disdained to modernise so much as a single breast-work or bastion, and remained still wrapped in the gloom of its vast forests, as grimly prepared for an attack now as in the times when a horse ready saddled had stood day and night in the Wyndhurst stables, and a broadsword newly sharpened had ever hung within reach of the master's hand. It was a place to look at, but not to live in. The long straight avenues and scrupulously stiff gravel-walks, laid out on something of a regal scale, might perhaps excite a sort of cold admiration, but they did not tempt to leisurely saunters. It was the sort of place which puts people on their good behaviour, and brings every one's store of company manners to the light. It seemed incongruous to walk vagrantly on these ceremonious stretches of gravel, or to laugh foolishly in

the shade of these historical-looking trees. "Have we got umbrellas?" said Lord Kippendale, as they alighted in the outer park. "I declare it is going to rain after all."

"We can take shelter inside the oak," suggested Miss Epperton, airily; "I am sure it ought to hold us, if that picture spoke true."

"But the horses can't get inside the oak," said Lady Baby. "Papa, must the poor horses stand out?"

"If that black fellow up there breaks," said Nicky, scowling at the sky, "we are in for a jolly good wetting, that's all."

"Then let us not give it time to break," said his father-in-law testily. "Which is the way to the oak? We had better make sure of that first."

But the gibbet-tree was not by any means the only sight at Nolesworth, as was proclaimed by the numerous sign-boards, which directed the visitor to go this way "To the Waterfall," or that way "To the Fairy Grove," and the various hands which pointed towards *spots* that were rather mysteriously designated

as "Dick's Cradle," or "Red Willie's Trysting-dell," and which excited Miss Epperton's curiosity to such a degree that a great many rounds were made, and a great many corners of the park explored, before the gibbet-tree was reached. And though Lord Kippendale fussed visibly, and continually pressed the pace, and though all the rest of the family were rather silent, and felt probably a great deal more guilty than ever their ancestors had felt when visiting these same grounds in the shades of night, Maud Epperton, strangely enough, appeared to be blind and deaf to these general symptoms of discomfort. Not only did she not hurry; but whenever a shadow of an excuse offered itself, she distinctly loitered, talking at first with animation, but gradually lapsing into pauses of what looked like anxious reflection, until, by the time the gibbet-tree was reached, she had become almost as silent as her companions.

"Has the oak disappointed you?" asked Mr Carbury at her elbow, as she stood with her head thrown back, gazing up rather blankly

into the naked branches. Maud quickly called up a smile.

"A little bit; yes—the portrait was a flattered one."

"Come, come, Miss Epperton. I am sorry to hurry you," burst out Lord Kippendale; "but just look at the sky! We positively must be going."

"Without booty?" said Mr Carbury, raising his eyebrows. "Who has ever heard of a raid without booty? How are we to show our faces in Scotland if we come back empty-handed?"

"We are not back in Scotland yet," said Maud, coolly. "Lord Kippendale, is there no better view to be had of the castle? We have seen everything, it strikes me, except the very kernel of the thing; and I am sure the rain will hold off for five minutes longer."

There *was* another view—the show-view in fact, the view of views, proclaimed upon numerous wooden boards, and pointed at by extra-large index-fingers—and as it really did seem *absurd* to leave a show-place without seeing the

show-view, this last extra round was decided upon.

"Dear me!" said Lady Baby, as they turned the corner of the walk which brought them in face of the castle, "we are not the only visitors after all who have braved the weather."

There was a bench at the end of the walk, and on it, with his back towards them, sat a young man, apparently engaged with a sketch-book. They were close upon him when they saw him, and, at the sound of their steps, he glanced over his shoulder; then, as though aware that he was obscuring the view, he rose and stepped aside, closing his sketch-book and slightly raising his hat. He appeared to be on the point of moving away altogether, when Miss Epperton, with a step forward, held out her hand and exclaimed—

"Sir Peter!"

CHAPTER IV.

SIR PETER.

"Love guided not his hand, content to see
Mere beauty, as of sunset hills or skies."

At Maud's exclamation, Lady Agnes and Lady Catherine looked at each other with a start; Lord Kippendale turned a shade redder, and Lady Baby grew almost pale.

"Miss Epperton!" said Sir Peter, with a look of unmistakable pleasure, "this is almost too good to be true! What happy skies have you dropped from?"

"Only from some very damp and grey ones," I am afraid," said Maud, laughing. She no longer looked tired, and a delicate and most becoming flush had sprung to her cheek.

"Do you know, it is not five minutes since I

was wondering how you could be conjured to the spot, and yet I had no glimpse of an idea that you were in the North. I shall begin to believe in magnetism. Will you kindly introduce me to your friends?"

Miss Epperton's hosts had stood by, looking rather haughty and feeling very miserable. Now, as though with one accord, they scanned Sir Peter's face, to mark what effect the discovery of their identity would have upon him. It had none whatever; he neither winced nor changed colour, and his easy and confident manner grew neither stiff nor suspicious. There was not a shade of constraint on his handsome, high-bred face as he cordially shook hands with Lord Kippendale and raised his hat to the ladies; and yet Miss Epperton had very distinctly pronounced the inimical name. Sir Peter was a tall, somewhat loosely built man, of seven or eight and twenty, with a pair of rather dreamy grey eyes, a careless and yet cordial smile, and a finely cut nose and chin.

"It is I who ought to apologise," he said, in answer to Lord Kippendale, who was taking

great trouble to explain that this meeting had not been intentional. "I know that I have no right to be in the outer park on Tuesdays, but that bit of mist against the hill tempted me out, and I did not think that any one would brave the weather to-day. There! was that not the first drop?"

It was the first drop, and the second, and the third.

"Come, girls, hurry up!" said Lord Kippendale, much relieved. "There is no use in getting drenched."

"None whatever," assented Sir Peter. "Can I help you to open your umbrella, Miss Epperton? Let me hold it for you." And Miss Epperton and Sir Peter under one umbrella led the way.

"To the left, to the left!" Lord Kippendale called after them, still struggling with his own umbrella. "You are taking the wrong turning; the carriages are to the left."

"But we are not going to the carriages," called back Sir Peter.

"In goodness' name, where to?"

"To the house, of course : you surely do not mean to drive home through the deluge that is coming ?"

"To the house?—eh, what?" repeated Lord Kippendale, much flurried by the struggle with his umbrella; "to the house? Which house? *Your* house?"

"To the castle," said Sir Peter, with an amused smile. What is the matter? Have I suggested anything very dreadful?"

"Bless me, no!" said Lord Kippendale, rather lamely, overwhelmed by the sudden discovery that after all there was nothing so very terrible in the suggestion; and that the fact of their respective ancestors having run each other through with their lances as often as circumstances would permit, or of having taken a more than neighbourly interest in each other's sheepfolds, could scarcely be alleged as rational grounds for risking an attack of lumbago or rheumatism.

"I think we shall find a fire over there," Sir Peter was saying, in as unconscious a manner as though there had never been a question of so much as a single missing cow between Bevans

and Wyndhursts. "And I venture to guess that your daughters would like to drive home with dry feet."

"As for my feet," said Lady Catherine, who was picking her way along, looking like the picture of lady-like misery, "I don't feel as if they ever would be dry again. I wonder how it is that I never *can* get boots like other people's."

Lord Kippendale said not a word more, and the castle was steered for. The party, hurrying along for shelter, fell naturally into couples, each couple being, so to say, linked by an umbrella; and under the shelter of each umbrella, remarks, favourable and unfavourable, were passed upon Sir Peter.

"He is *not* hunchbacked," said Lady Baby to Mr Carbury, "and there does not seem to be anything wrong with his intellect either. I cannot imagine why he should have been kept so much out of sight. I find him very handsome."

"Do you?" said Mr Carbury, rather shortly. "I always think that fair men are a mistake."

"He ought to ride a light weight in spite of

his height," said Nicky to his wife. "I'll be bound my grey mare could carry him, and I could put a stiffish price on if Wyndhurst were the buyer. I'm short of cash just now. You must get the governor to raise your allowance. Look here, Aggie! you're so slow about getting the governor to raise your allowance. And you must speak to him yourself next time. Kippendale has a way of being short with me; I don't always feel like tackling Kippendale."

"Yes, Nicky," said Agnes. She was never known to say "No, Nicky."

"Never was so taken aback in my life," Lord Kippendale was saying to his daughter Catherine. "If it wasn't for the loss of time, I should have protested against the arrangement; but that young fellow has such a way about him—seems to take it all for granted. How long will it take you to dry your feet? Five minutes?—eh?"

Catherine thought privately that it would take much longer, so she contented herself with an evasive reply.

The subject of these comments was likewise

indulging in umbrella confidences. "So I appeared like the wolf in the fable," said Miss Epperton. "Speak of—well, of somebody very black, and you will see his tail."

"Or else speak of the sun, and *on en voit les rayons*. I have stuck fast in Clytemnestra since your last sitting; when am I to have another?"

"*Are* you to have another? That appears to me to be the first point to be settled."

"It appears to me to be nothing of the sort. You promised to sit for Clytemnestra; and as long as I have not put the last touch to Clytemnestra's last eyelash, the engagement is not terminated. My easel and I shall haunt your footsteps until that end is reached. How long do you stay in these parts?"

"Not very long; so if your easel and you are really so determined——"

"We are. And as for the costume, it has occurred to me that a red scarf might look better than a green one. What made me think of it was that dress which you wore at Lady Euphrosyne's" (he always called his stepmother Lady Euphrosyne) "last month. I can't de-

scribe it, but it was all in tints. Pardon an artist's rudeness if I say that never, either before or since, have I seen you look so well."

"All in tints," repeated Maud, meditatively; "was that the evening that you took me in to dinner?"

"I am not certain; yes, to be sure it was. I distinctly remember what I suffered from the effects of that sickly blue-and-yellow garment opposite, and how your red dress felt just like a tonic by contrast. It is positively wicked of women not to match their colours properly."

"Oh," said Maud, but her voice sounded rather less buoyant. "Yes, I remember the evening: you brought me such a lovely red rose after dinner. I could not think where you had got it from."

Sir Peter laughed. "Well, it wasn't likely to be missed from Lady Euphrosyne's flower-vases, and it just wanted that to make the scale of colour in your dress complete. You can't think how well it looked against the red velvet."

Maud said nothing this time. A slight, very

slight but yet perceptible damp had fallen upon her spirits. It was gratifying that Sir Peter should so vividly recall her dress, but it would have been more gratifying if he had been quite sure about having taken her down to dinner that night.

"I ignore what the resources of the house may be," said Sir Peter, when the dripping visitors stood at length in the drawing-room. "Lady Euphrosyne has got the housekeeper with her in London, and I, a lonely and neglected bachelor, have been living *incog.* for a week; but I suppose it is not reckless to offer tea."

"As for pouring it out," he declared, when the tea had appeared, "I must throw myself on the mercy of whichever of the ladies will be good enough to play hostess."

The Ladies Bevan shrank back instinctively. This was really too much to be expected from any Bevan. An awkward pause appeared imminent, when, just at the right moment, Maud Epperton stepped up to the table and commenced to place the cups and distribute the

sugar. The others sat round the tea-table, feeling and looking rather frigid, and concentrating their chief attention upon the fine collection of sporting pictures, chiefly portraits, which covered the walls.

"Never mind about the tea not being strong, Miss Epperton," said Lord Kippendale, in a fever of half-suppressed impatience. "We can't keep the horses standing much longer; we really can't, Sir Peter."

"But you will have to wait till they are put in again," said Sir Peter, quietly. "I gave orders that they should be taken to the stables."

"I am glad of that," broke in Lady Baby, "for there is nothing so bad for old horses as standing in puddles of water; it very often makes their legs swell. What do you use for your horses' legs, Sir Peter?"

"I beg your pardon," said Sir Peter, turning from Miss Epperton, and for the first time becoming clearly aware of Lady Baby's existence. "You said something about horses' legs?"

"Do you find arnica or fluid best?"

"For feeding them with?" asked Sir Peter.

"Good heavens, no! for rubbing their legs with, of course. What do you rub their legs with after a hard day's hunting?"

"I don't rub them," said Sir Peter.

"You don't do it yourself, I daresay," with a gesture of impatience at his slowness of comprehension; "but surely you must know what you use on hunting-days."

"But," said Sir Peter, "I don't hunt."

"Don't hunt!" repeated every Bevan in the room, and there was a pause, almost of consternation. Lady Baby recovered first.

"To be sure; I forgot. You have been out of the way of it lately; you could only have hunted dolphins in the Mediterranean, and ridden upon sea-horses. How you must have missed it! What a trial it must have been!"

"Scarcely so much as if I had been at home," said Sir Peter, with a peculiar smile hovering about his lips.

Lady Baby felt remorseful. Did his health forbid him to hunt? And had her question unwittingly touched on a sore spot? And to a *Wyndhurst* how sore a spot it must be! "Well,

this season is over," she said, hurriedly, "and there is time enough before next; but we have some lovely rides about here even in summer. Don't you think so?"

"But I don't ride," said Sir Peter.

Lady Baby was in the act of raising her full cup to her lips; she put it down untouched, and gazed at Sir Peter with unspeakable things in her face.

"Bless my heart!" Lord Kippendale audibly ejaculated. Lady Agnes looked at Nicky, as if for guidance in this unlooked-for contingency; while Lady Catherine, who was resting one foot on the fender, came very near to singeing her damp skirt through sheer amazement. If Sir Peter had in this same tone of quiet unconcern announced that he could not read, the intelligence would have been received with far less agitation.

"Do you mean," asked Lady Baby, with a stern frown on her face, but in a tone which incredulous wonder rendered tremulous—"do you mean that you don't ride from choice, or from necessity?"

“Oh ! from choice, entirely. I have not been on a horse since I was fifteen ; and, please heaven, I shall never get on another.”

The last doubt was removed. He was a Wyndhurst—and he did not ride, could not ride, did not wish to ride ; had not the glimmering of an idea as to how horses’ legs should be treated after a hard day’s hunting ; had, perhaps, never seen a fox sailing across a stubble - field, and knew naught of the keen pleasure of breaking his way through tangled brushwood in the grey of a hunting-morning. And he did not blush as he said it, even though he spoke under the shadow of his grandfather’s portrait, who, in hunting - dress and spurs, frowned down from the wall, and even though his great-grandfather, on a blood-hunter, hung straight opposite.

“The fact is,” he explained, as he calmly stirred his tea, “I gave up riding by the advice of my doctor.”

“Ah !” There seemed to be a ray of renewed hope for his character.

“Yes ; he found that riding did not agree with me.”

"Not agree? What a pity! Why?"

"Because I usually fall off."

Lady Baby's lips twitched; and Lord Kippendale, after a brief struggle, burst into a hearty laugh. The first shock had been weathered, and somehow the frigidity had also disappeared.

"If the consequences are so dreadful," said Maud, who had felt rather "out of it" all this time, "I really hope that you have given up riding."

"Be quite easy on that point; I have suffered too much already. I am constitutionally timid."

Lord Kippendale caught something of a twinkle in Sir Peter's eye as he made this assertion in the most natural tone in the world; and, for some inexplicable reason, the old Earl went off into a second fit of laughter.

"But at least you used to ride," suggested Lady Baby, "when you were fifteen."

"Yes, I used to ride," said Sir Peter, gloomily; "I am not likely to forget it. There were hurdles put up on the lawn for my special

benefit, and an artificial stream dug in the park, a very wide and deep stream; I know, alas! how deep, for I have often lain at the bottom. I was made miserable with a succession of the most vicious ponies that the world ever produced. My father gave me a new riding-whip on every birthday. He seemed to think that perseverance would engraft the taste. But it was no use; life used to be a burden to me on hunting-days. But that is over now, thanks to Providence, and I have survived."

"This is dreadful," thought Lady Baby, "and he seems quite hardened too. I shall say something rude if we stay much longer. Ah, there is the carriage at last!"

While they were putting on their cloaks in the hall, there was something said about Clytemnestra and the sitting which Miss Epperton had promised Sir Peter, and Lord Kippendale was heard to make some hospitable speeches. He could scarcely do less, after the way in which the afternoon had shaped itself.

"Ugh!" growled Nicky, as they started homeward, "and I had just made up my mind

that eight hundred would not be too stiff a price to ask for the mare. But I may whistle for eight hundred pounds now."

"Of course that quite explains the cloud under which he lived," Lady Baby in the second carriage was saying to her father; "no wonder his father kept him out of sight."

Lord Kippendale was still gently shaking with laughter. Curiously and contradictorily enough, something about Sir Peter had rather tickled the fancy of the old fox-hunting Earl. "I'm not at all so sure that I would have kept him out of sight if I had been his father," he retorted; "I always thought Sir Anthony was a bit of a fool."

"Papa!" said Lady Baby, aghast, "you don't mean to say that you actually—*like* him? A man who dares to say that he is constitutionally timid?"

"*Dares*,—yes, that's the word; that's where it lies. I don't know whether he is constitutionally timid or not, my dear, but that I do know that it would need a precious deal less pluck to take a post and rails with an unex-

plored ditch on the other side and half the field pushing behind you, than to be a Wyndhurst and quietly tell a room full of Bevans that you can't ride. I wouldn't have done it for a thousand pounds, and there are not many fences that I have funkcd in my day."

CHAPTER V.

CLEOPATRA.

"Thine eyes so bright
Bereft my sight
When first I viewed thy face."

THE old schoolroom at Kippendale, in which no more lessons were now learnt since Lady Baby had decided that her education was finished, had sunk almost to the level of a lumber-room. Grammars and histories had begun to grow a little musty on the shelves for want of being opened, the tinted maps on the wall were fading to a uniform yellow, and the ancient piano, on which scales used daily to be strummed, had long since been finally locked, and even the key had gone astray. But, on a certain day in April, this ancient haunt of learning found itself

invaded, and filled unexpectedly with light and colour. Chests had been opened and cupboards ransacked ; and now, over the well-worn chairs, over the ink-spotted table and locked piano, there lay a disorderly but brilliant mass of silk and velvet, of dresses and mantles, of bits of gold brocade, faded scarves, and old-fashioned fans, while an earnest discussion was in progress.

Maud Epperton had suggested that to get up tableaux would be an excellent way of killing time in this rainy weather ; and Lady Baby once having caught at the excitement of the idea, every one else submitted.

"I have never seen tableaux in my life," said Lady Baby, "so I will take your advice about everything. You know all about the grouping and arranging, I suppose ?"

"I am afraid I don't," said Miss Epperton, shaking her head ; "we should require some one experienced."

"Oh, then, ask Mr Carbury ; he is sure to know. He does nothing now, but he seems to have done everything in the world and to have grown tired of it. I wonder, by the by,

why he has not grown tired of Kippendale yet."

"I doubt whether Mr Carbury would be a satisfactory stage-director," said Maud; "he is not enough of an artist."

Naturally the mention of the word artist led to the mention of Sir Peter; and presently it was decided that Sir Peter should be asked over to Kippendale. He had been at the house already on two different occasions, on each of which Miss Epperton had sat to him for Clytemnestra. But Clytemnestra was now finished, and, though the intercourse thus begun was not likely to die out immediately, still Maud considered that the tableaux had been a very happy thought. Tableaux could not be discussed in one day; so when Sir Peter was asked to come and stay a week at Kippendale, he found it quite natural, and came readily—so readily that Maud's heart beat high with hope.

"This is quite a new groove to be getting into with Nolesworth," said Lord Kippendale, rather surprised at himself after he had given

the invitation ; “ but I suppose that, if he does not mind coming, there is no reason why we should mind having him.”

It was strange how the old prejudice faded when once looked at in this new light which chance—or Maud Epperton—had thrown upon it ; like the outward shell of a barrier which has long been rotten at the core, and which wants but one resolute touch to crumble it into dust. Perhaps the barrier fell all the more readily because of Sir Peter’s absolute unconsciousness of its ever having existed. There were one or two points which in the very beginning of this renewed intercourse Lady Baby and her sisters instinctively avoided, as being possibly a little awkward for both parties ; amongst these were all references to Border history or to private executions. Such topics as horse-stealing or cattle-lifting were by common consent regarded as delicate, and not to be selected as subjects of conversation. The remains of the old wall round the garden were *not* pointed out to Sir Peter, as they were to most visitors ; and the pile of old song-books

on the chair was hastily stuffed into a cupboard. They might just as well have remained where they were. If Sir Peter had any views at all about the old feud, they were of a sort which were not likely to produce fresh bloodshed. "Do you know, I think that would be almost *paintable*," he said to Lady Baby one day, after she had, half reluctantly, half defiantly, been giving him the history of the stump of an old broadsword which had attracted his attention among a miscellaneous collection of weapons in the hall. "One of *my* ancestors broke it on the head of one of *your* ancestors," veracity compelled Lady Baby to acknowledge. "You don't say so!" said Sir Peter, quite cordially. "That shows that your ancestors used very inferior steel, or else that my ancestors had very superior skulls." And then he listened to the account of the single combat by moonlight, and at the end made the remark about the incident being "*paintable*." In face of this unconsciousness the consciousness of his new friends could not fail to dwindle. "And as for the riding," reflected Lord Kippendale, as

he tried to puzzle out the situation, "that's his own loss, and not ours; and it would be almost absurd to have found fault with the father and grandfather because they rode too well, and then to find fault with the son because he does not ride at all." After the lapse of ten days, this fact of Sir Peter not riding was contemplated rather more calmly; and though the discovery was hard to get over, and though he must always be looked upon as a degenerate descendant of his booted and spurred ancestors, still it had been tacitly agreed that, since he was not as he should be, he had better be taken as he was. Lady Baby had indeed attempted to open his eyes to his shortcomings, but she succeeded only in discovering still deeper depths of degradation.

"Why on earth should I want to hunt a fox?" he answered, quite unmoved by a panegyric on the noblest of sports; "the fox doesn't want to hunt me."

"You might as well say that partridges don't want to shoot you, and yet you shoot partridges."

"No, I don't."

"Well, then, grouse or woodcock; it doesn't matter which."

"No, it doesn't in the least matter," said Sir Peter, "because I don't shoot any of them. I am not quite sure that I know what a grouse is like, with its feathers on."

"Good heavens! Do you fish?"

"No."

"Sir Peter, Sir Peter, this is awful!" cried Lady Baby. "Do you mean to say that you absolutely kill *nothing*?"

"Not unless it wants to kill me."

After this his case was regarded as hopeless. But presently it was conceded that, though he would be useless with either a gun or a whip in his hand, still he might do well enough with a lead-pencil. He was holding one now, while he sat in judgment on the brocaded gowns presented for his approval, and, with a few rough strokes, was sketching the proposed arrangement of figures.

"Everything depends on catching each person's artistic possibilities," he explained, "and

every one has artistic possibilities of some sort ; it all lies in finding them out. Now, Lady Agnes's possibilities lie in the Anglo-Saxon line, and Lady Catherine requires a weeping-willow."

"And what do I require?" asked Maud.

"A Grecian tiara or an oriental veil. I suppose you are tired of dressing up as Clytemnestra. What do you say to Helen of Troy?"

"And Paris?"

"I fear you must do without a Paris. There is no one with the artistic possibilities of a Paris among us. Paris must positively be under twenty-four."

"Germaine is under twenty-four," said Lady Catherine; "and of course, just because we want him, he is not here. Could we not wait for him? He is to be back next week."

"It would be a pity to delay longer," said Maud, quickly. That absent boy was not the Paris she wished to see at her feet.

"No," said Lady Baby, "we can't delay, even for Germaine. I have quite made up my mind that the tableaux are to be this week."

Sir Peter made no remark, but looked at her rather curiously. She caught the glance.

"Are you weighing my artistic possibilities? What are they?"

"I should give you a crown," said Sir Peter, thoughtfully, "and a sceptre; but it should be a toy crown and a toy sceptre, and I should surround you with broken playthings and ill-treated dolls; and the name—well, the name of the picture should be, 'The Nursery Tyrant,' or something equivalent."

"Sir Peter!" she cried, facing him with indignant eyes, "you surely forget that I am not a child!"

"I should never be rude enough to forget anything of the sort," said Sir Peter, quite unmoved; "I was only talking of your artistic possibilities."

She threw up her head. Something in Sir Peter's tone had touched her almost like a skillfully conveyed lesson, and to Lady Baby the most distant hint of admonition or control was a thing unendurable. She was not used to it; how should she be?

“Proud as well as headstrong,” thought Sir Peter, as he watched her. “What a strange child! It is a pity they have spoiled her.”

“I don’t like your artistic possibility,” she said, with a petulant elevation of her chin.

“Then here is another; it has occurred to me this instant. If you will put this on for a moment, I will show you the other side of the medal, as the French say;” and Sir Peter picked up from the heap of things beside him a soft scarlet cap, which looked almost like the typical *bonnet rouge* of the Reign of Terror. “It fits you, does it not? Now, don’t you feel as if you could cry ‘*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité! A bas l’ordre; à bas les lois!*’ We could call it ‘the Spirit of Revolt.’”

“Oh, Sir Peter!” said Lady Agnes, “how can you say such things, even in joke? What would we be without laws? It is such a comfort to be told what to do.”

“Another artistic possibility!” cried Sir Peter, as he caught her look of distress—the distress of a yoked creature that likes its yoke, *and* would not know how to move without it.

“Allow me to place you on the picture as well, and then we can call it ‘Revolution and Order.’”

“No!” cried Lady Baby abruptly, flinging the red cap to the ground; “I will not play that part. Of course I have not got Agnes’s mania for doing what I am told; but I—I feel as if you were laughing at me, and—and treating me like a child. Think of something else.”

The discussion grew prolonged. Somebody asked what Mr Carbury was to be. “I think he had better be a corpse,” said Sir Peter, calmly eyeing his intended victim as though debating inwardly as to whether he would look to most advantage with a jewelled dagger sheathed in his heart, or with half-a-dozen arrows artistically disposed about his person. Mr Carbury tried to look civilly amused, but failed. The tableaux irritated him: it was not he who had proposed them; and there were, besides, certain vague misgivings which troubled his mind. A satin doublet would, no doubt, suit him admirably; but it could scarcely fail to suggest that odious

comparison to an Italian baritone which in the course of his life had caused him so much real mental suffering. A long cloak would have draped his tall figure gloriously, had he only not feared to look too thoroughly at home in it. If Mr Carbury had been possessed of one grain of vulgar coxcombry, he would have blithely donned both doublet and cloak, undisturbed by any such fine-drawn scruples ; but his vanity was of far too fastidious as well as too deep-rooted a sort, to glory in any mere dressing-up or display. A dread of ridicule may not always be a healthy mental sign, but it did Mr Carbury at least the good service of preserving him from a host of minor absurdities. Nobody ever saw him ogling himself in mirrors, or affectionately twirling his moustache, or complacently smoothing his necktie. And thus it happened that in general he did not pass for a vain man, and that none but very shrewd people suspected the overweening self-esteem which was his ruling passion.

When Mr Carbury had with some difficulty been fitted with a part, a difficulty which arose precisely from the ease with which he would

have fitted into so many parts, Launcelot and Elaine were suggested for Sir Peter and Lady Baby. Maud, busied with some lace she was mending for one of the costumes, began to grow uneasy. It was not for this that she had brought Sir Peter to Kippendale.

"Are the pictures all settled," she asked serenely, "all but mine?"

"Yes, all but yours—that is to say, all but the gem of the collection," answered Sir Peter; "for of course, Miss Epperton, you will make far the best picture of any of us. Helen of Troy must be discarded for want of a Paris; besides, I should prefer to make a single-figure study of you. How about Cleopatra? Ah! that flash of your eye settles it; I saw visions of Egypt in that glance. Yes, you shall be Cleopatra, the Cleopatra of the 'Dream of Fair Women,' 'brow-bound with burning gold.' It is true that your cheeks are not 'swarthy,' but we will not stick at a shade of complexion; and here is the very dress, gold brocade. Miss Epperton, excuse me for saying that you will be magnificent."

"He is talking of my artistic possibilities," thought Maud, with a sigh. "Well, let it be," she said aloud. It had occurred to her that if Sir Peter himself were disengaged during the tableau in which she appeared, he would have a far better chance of viewing her in her costume.

"We shall keep it for our last picture, our crowning triumph," said Sir Peter. "I want the effect to be dazzling. The brocade is splendid, but we must have jewels; there must be a glitter, a glamour, over Cleopatra—a vague suggestion of half the wealth of Egypt being on her back. In my mind the idea of the Egyptian queen is inseparable from the idea of 'beaten gold,' and 'divers-coloured fans,' and 'strange invisible perfume.' We must load Cleopatra with gems."

"Provided we have them," suggested Mr Carbury.

"Every one must contribute what they have," said Lady Baby. "I have some sapphires; and, oh Agnes, to be sure, the diamonds! I will fetch them."

Five minutes later Lady Baby was back in the room, holding in her hand a red-morocco case, in which lay a row of single diamonds of the first water, the same which Lady Agnes had worn on the evening of Mr Carbury's coming to Kippendale.

"Oh!" was all that Miss Epperton could say, and again, "oh!" It is a strange fact that even strong-minded women are apt to become weak-minded in face of a diamond necklace. The brilliant fire which flashed from the case as it opened, quite took away her speech for a moment. She had never seen such diamonds. "Oh, Lady Agnes, am I really to wear these?"

"They are not Agnes's, and you are to wear them," said Lady Baby; "they belong to Germaine's wife."

"His wife? But he is not married?"

"Of course not; but he will be some day, and then the diamonds go to her, whoever she is."

"Lucky creature!" said Miss Epperton, as she softly lifted the glittering string. The

very glitter somehow gave to Lady Baby's absent brother a greater importance than he had hitherto worn in Maud Epperton's eyes.

"It was about these diamonds that you once promised me a tragical story," said Mr Carbury; "was it not?"

"A tragical story?" cried Maud. "Oh, let us have it!"

"By all means, let us have it," said Sir Peter, sinking into a chair; "a little tragedy will be quite refreshing after so much art. Once upon a time——"

"Once upon a time," began Lady Baby, "papa had an elder brother, who was not married but who was engaged to be married, and he bought a diamond necklace for his bride. It was sent to him from London——"

"And was stolen out of the post-bag?" suggested Maud.

"No; it reached him quite safely, and he locked it away in an iron safe in the wall."

"Which safe? The one down-stairs?"

"Oh no; the safe is hundreds of miles away.

This did not happen at Kippendale, but at Gullyscoombe."

"And what is Gullyscoombe?"

"Gullyscoombe is what papa calls his useful estate. It is a hideous piece of land, I believe, but none of us have ever seen it; fortunately, it is very far away. But there is copper on it, you know; and all our money comes from it, somehow," added Lady Baby, with magnificent vagueness.

"And yet you have never seen it?" said Maud, reflectively. "I wonder you never go there, by way of a change."

"Go there! Go to Gullyscoombe!" from the three sisters, in different tones of horror.

"Why," said Lady Baby, "papa has only been there twice in his life himself; and each time he came away in a hurry—because he thought he would be driven to drowning himself in the sea, which came up close to his window at high tide. He calls Gullyscoombe the most God-forsaken spot between the four seas of Britain."

It was thus that Gullyscoombe was invari-

ably spoken of in the family. The distant estate on the sea-coast of the English county of Choughshire was regarded almost as a necessary evil; while the valuable produce of its copper-mines, which they had never seen and never wished to see, made life easy and luxurious for them, and was lavished open-handed on the beloved Kippendale.

"But was your uncle fond of God-forsaken places?" asked Maud; "or why did he live at Gullyscoombe?"

"Uncle Ronald was a dreadful martinet about business; and as he was going to be married, he had gone down to Gullyscoombe to look after his affairs. It was something about Wheal Tallyho (that was an old mine, you know) coming to an end, or something of that sort; but of course he came up here once a-week for the hunting. He started on one of these journeys on the day after he had locked away the diamonds, and as soon as he was gone the safe was robbed."

"By a servant, I suppose?"

"Well, yes, by a sort of servant. Uncle

Ronald never took more than one real servant with him when he went to Gullyscoombe, and that was Adam, the old groom, who is still with us; but there was a man upon the place, a very handy sort of a fellow, who led a kind of mixed existence, and who was sometimes a miner, and sometimes a fisherman, and sometimes anything else that turned up. And whenever there was any extra work to be done, and Christopher Swan—that was his name—did not happen to be either mining or fishing, then he was called in to do it. It was partly out of charity that Uncle Ronald used to employ him, for though he was a regular Jack-of-all-trades, he never seemed to prosper in anything he tried. He had lost one eye from a blast-hole exploding in his face; and though he was sharp in some ways, he was not always very rational—people said that came from the mast of a fishing-boat having fallen on his head when he was a child. In general, people disliked him and were rather afraid of him. I am not sure that they didn't think he was a sort of sorcerer; at any rate

they all seem to have believed that he possessed the power of finding metals with the divining-rod. There really seems to have been something uncanny about him. But Uncle Ronald never had any patience with what he called fanciful prejudices, and he often had Christopher Swan in the house. Well, on one of these occasions when Christopher had been engaged for a week, the overseer, who lived in the house, heard a noise and found the safe-door open. This was on the night after Uncle Ronald's departure. Everybody turned out except Christopher Swan, who had disappeared. Next they noticed that the boat had been unmoored and was gone. There were more boats got, and the thief was pursued; but they found nothing, and two days afterwards the boat came drifting back, keel uppermost. The thief had been drowned."

"Well, but the diamonds?" asked Maud, bewildered; "they could not have come back with the boat, and they were not drowned, since I hold them in my hands. Or did your uncle buy another necklace for his bride?"

“Poor Uncle Ronald! No; his bride did not need another necklace, for she never married him. He did not get back to Gullyscoombe again; he broke his neck out hunting. And now comes the mysterious part of the story. I told you that there was a groom in the house, too: he had been away with Uncle Ronald at the time of the robbery. A few months later, he married the niece of one of the fishermen near Gullyscoombe. Her name was Molly, and she was very pretty. Uncle Ronald used to call her the Destroying Angel, because she used to have a new sweetheart every week. Papa, when he succeeded to the title, had kept Adam in his service. One day, several months later, there was a great noise heard in the stable-yard, and Adam burst into papa’s room dragging his wife by the hand; she was staring and pale as a sheet, and round her neck she had—guess what?”

“The diamonds?”

“Yes, the diamonds. Adam had surprised her kneeling before her open box, and looking at herself in a glass inside the lid. He had taken

her by the hand, and dragged her, just as she was, through the stable-yard, before all the stable-boys, and he actually flung her down at papa's feet, diamonds and all. She did nothing but cry at first, but at last she confessed that Christopher Swan had given her the diamonds as a present, but that she had not known where he had taken them from. She was so awfully silly about it that papa half thought of forgiving her, but Adam took her by the two shoulders and turned her out of the house-door; and she never came back. She died a great many years ago in London."

"And could she throw any light on the fate of the unfortunate Christopher?" asked Sir Peter. "How had he conveyed the diamonds to her?"

"Oh, I suppose she helped him in the robbing. Christopher Swan must, of course, have been drowned; he has never been heard of since."

"A curious story," said Maud, still gazing at the diamonds. "It is evident that the *Destroying Angel* had a large choice of victims, and it

is conceivable that she should have preferred the man with two eyes to the man with one. Well, it does not much matter now ; the upshot of it is, that the diamonds are here, and that I am to wear them as Cleopatra." And the talk drifted from the one-eyed miner back to the Egyptian queen.

The mention of the diamond robbery had been purely casual, and the tragedy of Christopher Swan was spoken of as a thing accomplished and done with. It did not cross the mind of either Lady Baby, the teller of the story, or that of any of her listeners, that there might yet remain one act of the tragedy to be played out, or rather that the play was to have an after-play destined to influence the lives of more than one of the persons assembled to-day in the old schoolroom at Kippendale.

The evening fixed for the tableaux happened to be the same on which Lord Germaine was expected home. It had been calculated that he would be able to get down from the station in time to form one of the spectators. But whether it was that the train was late, or the

horses slow, or the clocks in the house fast, nine o'clock had struck before there was any sign of his appearance. The invited guests, consisting of two or three fox-hunting squires, and about as many agricultural lairds, with their wives and daughters, had already taken their places before the curtain ; while behind it Mr Carbury, in the character of a slain knight bewailed by his bride on the battle-field, was beginning to discover that wooden boards can be very hard indeed.

"This will never do," said Lord Kippendale, after having pulled out his watch fifty times in the course of five minutes ; "we cannot wait any longer. Germaine has only himself to thank for his unpunctuality. For goodness' sake, don't let us sit here for ever ! Up with the curtain !"

The curtain went up and discovered Mr Carbury and Catherine.

"Well done, Kate !" cried Lord Kippendale delighted, amidst the murmur of applause. "Wailing and dishevelled, eh ? she looks *it to the very life* ;" for Lady Catherine

indeed revelled in the becoming despair of her rôle.

"But who is Launcelot?" was whispered round the circle, as the curtain next rose on Launcelot and Elaine; Elaine with her hands outstretched and her blue eyes uplifted to Launcelot, as she received the sacred shield in keeping. There were many present to whom the young baronet was still a stranger.

"It is Sir Peter Wyndhurst," said Lord Kippendale, stroking his chin rather thoughtfully; and immediately it was whispered round the circle, "It is Sir Peter Wyndhurst." And more than one glance of surprise was interchanged, and some people said to themselves, "Lord Kippendale is turning over a new leaf;" others, "What a tall man Sir Peter is!" while yet others wondered whether Sir Peter's good looks were entirely owing to the helmet, or whether some of them were his own.

"Your daughter looks lovely," whispered the lady next Lord Kippendale.

"Eh? Yes: but I wonder she can stand so

still ; she doesn't so much as blink—yes, there she is blinking ; holloa ! what was that ?”

The shield had fallen to the ground with a clatter, and Launcelot, springing forward, pulled down the curtain.

“ Did you find it too heavy ?” asked Sir Peter, turning to where Lady Baby stood, looking equally ready to laugh or cry.

“ Yes—no ; it was papa's talking that put me out. I wish people would not make remarks aloud. I felt quite hot all of a sudden.”

“ Is the room too warm ?”

“ No, it was not the room, it was the blinking ; how could I help blinking ?”

“ I told you that did not signify ; why, even a photographer allows people to blink. It is all right, so long as you look straight into my face.”

“ But I don't want to look straight into any one's face.”

“ It is an artistic necessity,” urged Sir Peter. “ There ! they want the curtain up for the second view. Are you ready ?”

“ No, I will not do it again ; tell them that I will not.”

"As you like," said Sir Peter, quietly.

"Well, then; for the next picture!" Another picture and then another were displayed, and then the last had been reached. But this time the preparatory pause was longer, for Sir Peter was almost over-fastidious about the finishing touches of this picture. All the other tableaux had embraced two or more figures, but this was one solitary resplendent apparition—the Cleopatra which Sir Peter had so studiously planned, and on which Maud Epperton had, so to say, staked her last chance. It was the illustration of Tennyson's lines:—

"I turning saw, throned on a flowery rise,
One sitting on a crimson scarf unroll'd;
A queen, with swarthy cheeks and bold black eyes,
Brow-bound with burning gold."

"There now, Miss Epperton," said Sir Peter, as he settled the last fold of her drapery, "you are absolutely perfect, all but the direction of your eyes. Look towards the public, but not at them; let your gaze pass over their heads, and fix it on some distinct point, say the door, for instance. You will find that a help. And

try to think that the door is not a door, but some slave whose allegiance you are claiming. Shall I give the signal?"

He gave the signal. But this time, as the curtain rose, instead of the admiring murmur, there was a minute of complete silence. No one was at all prepared for the effect Maud would produce; her beauty was of that sort which can be almost incalculably enhanced by gaslight and costume. And here every advantage had been lavished, every point had been weighed. The severe lines of her flowing robe gave to her splendid figure an almost statuesque perfection, while the dusky waves of her unbound hair fell round her like a mantle. With one beautiful arm half raised, and her crimson lips just parted, as though in the act of speaking, she sat immovable, and nothing but the quiver of the diamonds on her neck and the brilliancy of her dark eyes showed that she was no statue.

A burst of applause followed upon the first silence of surprise. Recovered from their amazement, the fox-hunting squires and the agricultural lairds, imagining that they had

become young again, clapped their hands with vigour and shouted themselves hoarse with approbation. And in the midst of the noise the door opened unnoticed, and a curly-haired young giant in a travelling-coat stood on the threshold, and stared, and rubbed his eyes, and stared again, wondering how it was that he had never before seen anything as beautiful as that glittering vision, whose eyes, bright with triumph, were looking straight into his, and asking himself whether she was a woman, or whether in the next minute she would melt back to empty air. And then Lady Baby sprang out from behind the scenes, crying—

“Germaine has come! Here is Germaine at last!”

CHAPTER VI.

CLEOPATRA AT HOME.

“Judge not thy friend until thou standest in his place.”

MAUD EPPERTON sat before her toilet-glass, and with thoughtful eyes gazed into its depths. She was still Cleopatra, “brow-bound with burning gold,” and the diamonds still glittered on her neck. Though every one in the house was long since asleep, she lingered as though unwilling to part with one jot of her Egyptian splendour.

And yet it was not of her Egyptian splendour she was thinking as she sat, there quite still, meeting her own gaze in the glass, her head a little bent, and her arms, laden with bracelets, resting on the toilet-table. Her thoughts were

travelling back over the last few weeks—were passing each day in a sort of cursory review, until they halted on one especial day, which stood out branded with a mark of its own. Nothing could have been more different, more wide apart to all appearances, than that day and this present one; and yet it was exactly the brilliancy of this evening which sent back her thoughts straight to the gloom of that other one. They were linked by an invisible thread. The other had been the cause, this was the effect.

How dark it had been, how chill and damp, as she peered through the blurred window of the fly which was taking her from the station to her aunt's lodging, and what a time she had stood shivering on the doorstep before the well-known slip-slap of the lodging-house servant's down-trodden shoes had been heard coming along the passage. Up a steep staircase Maud had dragged herself wearily — up several steep staircases, until she reached the flat occupied by her spinster aunt, the elder Miss Epperton. The kitchen on this flat had a window which received its light through the passage, and there were

various half-jars of butter and remains of cold pudding standing on the sill inside. A light burned dimly within, and some one was moving about the hearth.

"She has not waited dinner for me," said Maud, as she looked through the window; and then, slowly and reluctantly, she pushed open the door. A minute later she stood in her aunt's sitting-room. The sitting-room was the dining-room as well—the big round table in the middle being cleared three times a-day to make room for dishes and glasses. At this round table Maud's aunt was sitting, having just finished eating her soup, and was putting in a few stitches to a stripe of sky-blue crochet-work, while waiting for Sarah-Ann to bring in the Irish stew. At the sound of the opening door she looked over her spectacles at Maud, then put in the six remaining stitches to the row she was working, and then only laid down the stripe and gazed deliberately at her niece.

"So you are back?" she said, blankly and drearily.

"Yes, I am back," said Maud, in a tone

which betrayed nothing but the indifference of fatigue. "Did you not get my telegram?"

"Yes, I got your telegram. I suppose Sarah-Ann has put sheets on your bed. I told her to."

"And the soup would have spoiled, of course, by standing five minutes longer," said Maud, with a touch of irritation.

"The soup would have spoiled, probably; it was singed at any rate, by reason, I suppose, of Sarah-Ann having to look after your room. What makes you come down here in this way, like a thunderbolt? You may be used to flying about like a rocket, but I am not used to having rockets fly at me. What makes you come down here at all? Couldn't you have written? What is the good of spending a shilling instead of a penny? I detest telegrams."

"I had no time to write," said Maud, sinking into a chair and pulling her hat off her aching head: "it was only this morning that the Oakhams finally made up their minds to go to Paris. I had only just time to send off that telegram and pack up my things."

"And why didn't the Oakhams take you to Paris with them? They took you to Bourne-mouth last year; and the difference of the ticket wouldn't be much to *them*. Are they tired of you?"

"Very likely they are," said Maud, with a smile that looked dangerous: "they have another daughter out this year, too."

"And what has become of the Bailies and the Belfields, and all the rest of your fine titled friends? Have they all got daughters come out too? Has London turned into a wilderness? Dear, dear! who ever would have thought that the beautiful Miss Epperton would condescend to show her face in Brackton at this time of year? Why, the place will look quite new to you, my dear. I don't believe you have seen it by an April light since you were fifteen; and that's a good bit back now, you know."

"The Bailies are in mourning," answered Maud, as she slowly dipped her spoon into the plate of warmed-up potato-soup which Sarah-Ann had placed before her; "and the Belfields have got *their* house full, and most of my other friends

are either out of town or else unable to ask me just at present."

Miss Epperton the elder took up her sky-blue stripe again and held it close to the lamp. It was necessary to do so, because the wick could not be turned up high on account of the chimney being cracked.

"Yes, yes," she said, with a short and dismal laugh, "that's how it begins. In a few years more you will be quite surprised to see how full your 'friends' houses will be exactly at the time you want an invitation: it can't go on for ever, you know. How old are you? Thirty next birthday? No wonder they are tired of their toy; and the toy is not so pretty as it was either. You have gone off a good deal in these two last months, my dear."

Maud's eyes gleamed, but she sat quite still. After her day of hurry and travelling she felt almost too tired to be angry. Her glance strayed round the room, over the horse-hair chairs and the threadbare carpet, and towards Sarah-Ann bringing in the Irish stew. Yesterday she had dined in a room hung with peacock-

blue silk, and a powdered footman had moved her plate.

"Aunt Sophy," she said suddenly, "what has become of the piano?"

"Sold," was the short reply.

"Sold? Good gracious! why?"

"Because I wanted the money. Do you wish for any more reasons? If you do, I can give you one—they've raised the rent."

"Oh!" Maud sank back despondently on her chair.

"So if you want to practise your waltzes, you will have to do it elsewhere."

"But the rent is paid this term?"

"Yes, the rent is paid this term, thanks to keeping down the butcher's bill and not having the fire put on till the afternoon. But the rent won't be paid next term if there's a second mouth to feed. How long have you come for?"

The question was not put roughly, scarcely harshly; it was put only with that dreary hopelessness which has no room for sentiment.

"I don't know," said Maud, with a hysterical

laugh. "Are you going to turn me out of doors?"

"No. For one thing, I don't suppose you would go. You may have a deal of pride about you, my dear, but it doesn't often interfere with your convenience. You wouldn't be here to-night if it did."

"Oh, Aunt Sophy, where else could I have gone to?" cried Maud, with a sob. "Do not be so unmerciful! You know I have no home but this."

The elder Miss Epperton made no answer just at once, but helped herself to a very small portion of salt. Then she looked across suddenly into her niece's face. "*Why* have you no home but this?" she asked. "That's what I want to know."

Maud sat silent, looking sullenly at her plate.

"You don't play the innocent—that's one good thing. I think we both prefer plain English. Why haven't you got a husband? It's a husband's place to feed his wife. I have put bread into your mouth as long as I had it, but what I haven't got I can't give; and it's no

use talking of mercy or pity. If I had a house in London and ten thousand a-year, I daresay I should be very merciful, and I should be a most loving aunt, and you a most affectionate niece; but I haven't, and there's an end of it. And it's no use pretending that it is a joy to me to have you on my hands—for it is not. And if I am to come to a crust of bread, which does not seem unlikely, I would a great deal rather eat it by myself than share it with any one, even if it be my brother's child."

Maud dropped her knife and fork with a clatter, and rose from her chair. "That will do, Aunt Sophy," she said, hoarsely; "that is just about as much as I can bear. I—I can't eat any more. I am going."

"Where to? The poorhouse?"

"To my room just at present; that is, the room you let me have; and afterwards, I don't know—to some place where my food is not grudged me." And snatching up her hat and gloves, Maud walked from the room.

"She will be back before the table is cleared," said Miss Sophy Epperton, nodding her head

twice at the door as it shut with a slam. But Miss Sophy Epperton was mistaken. Maud did not show herself again that evening. Though she walked so steadily from the room, she was in reality shaking all over from the excitement of overstrained nerves. The first thing she did on reaching her room was to stumble and nearly fall over the travelling trunk which had been left standing in the middle of the floor, and which, in her agitation, she did not see. There were no matches on the chimney-piece and no fire in the grate; but as there was also no curtain to the window, and a street lamp burned straight opposite, the room was not quite dark. At any rate, there was light enough for what Maud had to do, and that was merely to sit down and think, think, think of what her next step should be—which way she should turn on her lonely and precarious path in life. As she sat there before the empty grate, with her elbows on her knees and her hands pressed over her face, few people indeed would have recognised the brilliant Miss Epperton who had graced so many drawing-rooms for so many years past.

who could rattle off small-talk with the best of chatterers, and smile as blithely as the most favoured child of fortune. And yet this was the real Maud Epperton as much as the other—more than the other, perhaps; for much of that brilliancy was but an outward gloss, assumed because the world will not tolerate what is dull and sad, and because Maud's only hope in life lay in keeping friends with the world.

Maud Epperton had never known her parents. She had neither brother nor sister, nor—with the exception of her aunt Sophy—near relations of any sort; and if the penniless girl had secured for herself a recognised place in London society, it was by sheer strength of her own cleverness. In default of fortune, she lived upon her wits. Her first appearance had been under the wing of a distant cousin in high life (for she was well connected on her mother's side), who, growing tired of her when after one season she had failed to make the brilliant match expected of her, had handed her on to another chaperon, from whom she had passed on to another. Thus she had *struggled on* in hand-to-mouth fashion, by turns

admired and slighted, taken up and dropped ; and in this way she had slowly become what she was,—had learnt to stoop and dissimulate, to curry the favour which to her meant not only balls and theatre-tickets, but also food and lodgings ; had taught herself to flatter women who had not the tenth particle of her beauty, to submit her judgment to that of women who had not the tenth particle of her brains ; had acquired the talent of smiling with rage in her heart, and of laughing her gayest when she felt sad to death.

And was it all in vain ? Were hundreds of painfully devised plans, were thousands of mortifications swallowed, were ten seasons of such grinding work as only fashion dare demand of her slaves, to result in old-maidenhood, spent in the company of Aunt Sophy's still older maidenhood ? Obviously there was but one way of escape from this existence as dismal as it was humiliating, and that way was matrimony. It was strange that, with all her beauty, Maud was still Miss Epperton ; and yet, perhaps, seeing the mixture in Maud's

nature, it was not very strange. Had she been a little harder, she would have made a wise and worldly marriage long ago; had she been a little softer, she would probably have made a foolish one. She might have done either. On one occasion she had all but accepted a grey-haired Croesus who, with senile ardour, had laid his riches at her feet; another time she had been half engaged to a curate with soft brown eyes and an empty pocket. But in both these cases, when it came to the point her courage had failed; she was, after all, not quite worldly enough to accept the rich old man—and she was, after all, not quite unworldly enough to marry the poor young one. She had been very young herself when both these things happened, and when she thought the matter over nowadays, she always felt quite sure that she would act just the same again as regards the curate, but she was not quite so sure now as regards the millionaire. Much in her had hardened since then, and millionaires were not so plentiful as they used to be. Most girls in her place would

have thought that even a penniless husband would have been a welcome exchange for Aunt Sophy; and as the curate episode showed, Maud had come very near to thinking so herself; but on this and other occasions her very clear common-sense had saved her from wrecking her one chance in life upon any rock of mere mortification or petulance. Mortified she might feel, and petulant she could be, for those people who said that Miss Epperton was all made up of calculation judged her falsely. She was, on the contrary, all made up of impulse, only that she almost invariably withstood her impulses. And who would blame her for her common-sense? Had it not been acquired in a hard enough school? When people said, "Miss Epperton is trying to catch a rich husband," they little knew what alternative Miss Epperton had before her eyes. It was not so much that she was covetous of riches, as that she was terrified of poverty. She knew it too well, knew it with all its sordid cares and its countless worries, with all its great horrors and its little miseries; had

watched how under its touch all brightness had faded from her aunt's life, how kindness had been cankered and sweetness soured, and softness pinched away by its tightening fingers, until a woman, once fairly amiable and undoubtedly well-intentioned, had gradually turned into this snappish and hardened and prematurely withered Aunt Sophy.

And Maud knew more than this, for she had seen life in many aspects ; she knew that there was a worse poverty than this, the poverty of struggling families and of hungry children—a poverty more heartbreaking, if less solitary. And thus, while many a girl without any more vocation for self-sacrifice than Maud had, would have walked blithely and blindly into an imprudent marriage, simply because she did not know what she was doing, Maud, knowing too well, preferred to remain Miss Epperton ; and this is why she was able to swallow the bread which her Aunt Sophy gave her without choking with shame. Such scenes as the one to-night were of no very unusual occurrence, but her aunt had never

stated the case quite so brutally before; and all that there remained of pride in Maud was quivering now as though under a lash. Short of turning her niece on to the street, what more could she have said? "And it is true," said Maud, as she clasped and unclasped her trembling hands; "it is quite true; I am another mouth to feed; she cannot give me what she has not got;" and having reached this point in her reflections, Maud suddenly remembered that all she had got this evening was a few spoonfuls of singed potato-soup, and she realised all at once that she was almost faint with hunger. The vision which this discovery most distinctly conjured up before her mind's eye was that of the Irish stew which at her indignant exit she had left almost untouched upon her plate. Would it be there still? Rather cold, rather uninviting perhaps; but what of that? she *was* so hungry! "Perhaps Aunt Sophy will send me a message," she said to herself. "Perhaps Sarah-Ann will bring me something; she must know I have had no dinner,"—and for a little while after this

Maud sat listening for some sound in the passage; but time passed, and all was still. Then she heard her aunt come out of the sitting-room and go into her bedroom—for Maud, busy with her thoughts, had not realised how long she had sat there. Then Sarah-Ann came along the passage and put out the lamp, and, returning to the kitchen, locked the door behind her. And then Maud's courage broke down. The full consciousness of her wretched loneliness seemed to sweep down upon her. And was it because of the awful idea of missing this season in London? or was it because she remembered that she would be thirty next birthday? or was it only because she had travelled very far and eaten very little that day? More probably it was a mixture of all these causes which made her suddenly break into a flood of scalding tears.

“My welcome!” she sobbed aloud, “my welcome home! Oh, where can I go? Yes, Aunt Sophy is right; why have I not got another home? Oh, who could give me one? *who—who?*”

She cried for about five minutes, and then her common-sense began to come to her aid, and suggested that the first thing to be done was to still these unbearable pangs of vulgar, physical hunger. Half blind with tears, she groped her way to her travelling-bag, and dug out from its depths a few stale sandwiches and broken biscuits that had survived the journey. Then, with her shawl huddled round her—for the evening had grown very chill—she sat down again beside the empty grate, and ate her vagabond fare by the light of the street lamp.

She was much calmer now. The burst of tears had relieved her, and she felt better able to take a dispassionate review of her situation. Though she still kept repeating that wild query of "Who? who?" there was an answer to it already in her mind. A name stood out in her thoughts shining like a faint star of hope suggesting the bare possibility of escape. It was the name of Sir Peter Wyndhurst.

A short time before this she had met Sir Peter at his stepmother's house in London, and

it had immediately become evident to her that she had produced some sort of impression upon him. His open admiration had been noted and talked of ; he had followed her about for several days, and at last had asked leave to paint her portrait. But the portrait was not done when business called him away to Scotland, and Maud's hopes, which had begun to rise high, were abruptly extinguished.

So, at least, it had seemed. But now, with wits sharpened by the need of the moment, casting about for some straw of hope to catch at, she began to ask herself whether something might not yet be done. She was not in love with Sir Peter. She did not for a moment try to persuade herself that she was—for she always preferred to be honest when she could possibly afford it ; but she had a distinct liking for him. He was sympathetic to her ; was not that enough ? She was persuaded that his wife would be a lucky woman, and this not only because he was enormously rich. This was no case of the wealthy monsters, the leering millionaires, who in bygone days had knelt

at her feet. To marry Sir Peter, despite his thousands, would not even entail any distinct loss of self-respect.

That advantage, therefore, must be followed up. A very little more reflection fixed this resolve. She was quite herself again now, her figure straightened, the tears dried on her cheeks, her mind grappling with the problem in hand. It was not often that she gave way to fits of such weakness as the one she had indulged in to-night. Her judgment was in general clear and masterful, and her resolutions were ever quickly formed and carried out with spirit. Very soon she had devised the ways and means by which her project was to be carried out; she had recollected her lucky acquaintance with Lady Catherine, and determined to write a letter which should be a masterpiece of diplomacy. She was quite sure of the surprise which, despite all its diplomacy, the letter must cause, but something like despair had made her more reckless than usual.

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How Maud Epperton acted upon that resolu-

tion has already been told. Up to her meeting with Sir Peter all her plans had worked without a flaw ; but after that point there came a check. Sir Peter's admiration was as evident as ever. How was it, then, that he did not take fire ? Vanity for its own sake was a weakness which Maud never gave way to ; and even before the tableaux were done rehearsing, she had pierced the question to its core, and had realised that Sir Peter's interest in her was the interest of a painter in a beautiful model.

Now, as she sat before her glass in her rich costume, she alone awake in all the house, Maud did not mince matters in her mind.

"As regards the whole parcel of those rosy-cheeked squires," she said aloud, "I have been a success. I seemed to go to their heads like champagne. I think some of them did not walk quite straight out of the door ; they will have Cleopatra on the brain for a fortnight to come. But as regards Sir Peter, I have been—let me be honest, there is no one here but my looking-glass,—I have been a failure." She said the word firmly, but in her eyes there was

no failure written, rather there was something that looked like a doubtful, dawning triumph. She knew that she had gained a victory in the very moment of defeat; for, immovable as she had remained, and wrapt as she had seemed in her part, by her alone of all present the opening of the door had been noticed. With her eyes fixed on the doorway she could not help seeing the young man who stood there; she had observed his start and change of colour, had almost guessed at the very shape of the question which in his first bewilderment he had put to himself. Before any one else had even noticed that he was in the room, she had realised that he was Lord Germaine, and had said to herself, "Why, he is more than a boy—he is almost a man;" and before even she had stepped off her pedestal, an amazing thought had flashed through her mind, and unconsciously her brain was at work upon this new conception while she was still thanking Sir Peter for his help in disentangling her train.

There is a Scottish proverb which says that

“when ae door steeks anither opens”; and though Maud had never heard this saying, something of the same idea was floating in her mind to-night. “I wonder what that boy looks like by daylight,” she mused; “he struck me as handsome. I had not realised that he is actually twenty-three—they all talked of him as of a mere schoolboy. Heavens! how he looked at me! I wonder——” she broke off, and fell into brooding thought. “Of course, he is the only son,” she said, presently; “and though I don’t think they are inordinately rich, they are without doubt very comfortably off. Evidently it must all come from those copper-mines down in the south—for Kippendale, though it is very ornamental, can scarcely be productive. Why, there are no farms at all; it is all one big pleasure-ground. I wish I knew a little more about copper; and I wish, oh, I wish that I had not to take off these diamonds—they make me look quite five years younger. But it is late. Cleopatra, farewell!”

She unclasped the necklace, and held it for

a minute dangling in the light. All at once she gave a short laugh.

“Germaine’s wife’s diamonds, to be sure! I had forgotten that. Germaine’s wife’s diamonds!”

CHAPTER VII.

WHEAL TALLY-HO.

"All engulfed in rock
Of hue ferruginous."

IF Maud was indeed anxious to gain a little more insight into the mysteries of copper-mining, it would seem as though fate were inclined to smile upon her latest desire; for, in the course of the next few days, there came in her way two distinct opportunities of picking up some useful shreds of information.

The first of these opportunities occurred on the very day after the tableaux. Maud had gone into the library after breakfast, with the intention of restoring to their places some of the illustrated histories of costume which had

been consulted for the pictures. Maud's habits were methodical in the extreme, and it was by such little services as these that she contrived to keep herself afloat in society. In one corner of the library there stood a glass case with various minute and generally indescribable articles, which had been carefully labelled and ranged there by some Bevan of bygone days. Most of these articles were historical, or at least semi-historical. There was the usual lock of Prince Charlie's hair, which no Scotch family of any note could well be without; there was also the usual piece of exceedingly fine and exceedingly useless needlework of which Mary Queen of Scots seems to have executed so many square miles; there was the unavoidable "quaigh," out of which either Wallace or Bruce, or somebody else, had drunk his stirrup-cup; and all the other interesting if somewhat doubtful relics which, as a matter of course, are to be found in every glass case of curiosities north of the Tweed. But in this particular glass case the display was varied by a great many curious little lumps of all shapes

and sizes, and shining with a dull subdued glimmer of yellowish-green or greenish-yellow. Maud had never thought of examining the curiosity-case before, for neither Prince Charlie nor Robert Bruce interested her very particularly; but on this occasion, as she passed the case on her way to the book-shelves, her eye happened to be caught by a label attached to one of the greenish lumps, and on it there was distinctly written "Sample of Copper—Wheal Tally-ho, 183-." With awakened interest she stopped beside the case and bent over it. She was standing thus when Lord Kippendale came in.

"Am I disturbing you?" asked Maud.
"Shall I go?"

"Nothing of the sort," said Lord Kippendale, briskly—"nothing of the sort; only too glad if any one will look after the books; they've not been in order, for the matter of that, since my father's time. Don't let me scare you away. Nothing like getting a thing done when you're at it. What have you found there to interest you? Eh? Is it Mary Stuart's em-

broidery you're looking at? I believe there are yards more of it somewhere in a cupboard up-stairs."

"No, I was not looking at the embroidery just now; I was wondering how people ever discovered that these pieces of rubbishy-looking stones were so valuable. You brought them from Gullyscoombe, I suppose?"

"No; not I. My poor brother did; collected them himself, labelled them himself. Ronald took a terrible interest in the mines."

"And don't you?"

"In the money they bring me," chuckled Lord Kippendale, "yes, a vast interest; but in those holes in the ground, and all the questions about cages and shafts, and pumping-engines and levels, and the 'poor lodes' and the 'keenly lodes,' bless you, no! Details disagree with me, Miss Epperton. Why, the mere idea of writing out those tickets and gumming them on would be enough to send me half-daft. That's the Wheal Tally-ho sample you are looking at now, (it was my grandfather who baptised it) old mine shut up thirty years

ago; came to grief just about the same time that poor Ronald did."

"Yes?" said Maud, with a distinct point of interrogation, for the cadence of Lord Kippen-dale's voice seemed to indicate a full stop.

"Yes. You see it had grown very poor—was being worked at a loss, in fact; and then, just as they were trying to make up their minds as to whether they should stop the work or not, half-a-dozen yards of roofing mercifully fell in, and that settled their minds for them. It wasn't worth the expense of clearing out; so Wheal Tally-ho was shut up."

"There are a good many shut-up mines down there, are there not?" asked Maud, bending over the glass case.

"Not on my land, I am happy to say. Tally-ho is the only one that has ever failed me, or is likely to fail me either, from what Captain John says. He's my head man, you know. According to him the mines we are working now—the 'Bluebell Mines,' we call them (we've always had the christening of our mines in *our own hands*)—have got copper enough to

send to grass for another half-century, another half-hundred of centuries, perhaps."

Maud scrutinised the samples from the Bluebell Mines in the case before her. She wished to know why the colour was so different from the Tally-ho sample?

"That's because they are richer—very much richer. Now poor Ronald could have told you, to an exact figure, how much per cent of copper there is in this stone, and how much in the other; but it's no use asking me those things. All I know is that the workings under the sea have always paid much better than any workings that have ever been tried inland.

The mention of mines under the sea interested Maud very much. It took her only a few minutes to find out that the Bluebell Mines before-mentioned extended to a considerable distance from the shore, and that the miners actually worked with ships sailing over their heads, and could hear the very stones grinding each other into powder upon the ocean's bed.

"And you have heard them?" asked Maud.

"Yes, once. They dragged me down there after Ronald's death. It was a terrible scrimmage. But, to tell the truth, it was the only scrimmage I ever had in connection with the mines, though the whole concern is nominally in my own hands, and would no doubt be an unbearable bother if it were not for Captain John being such an ace of trumps as he fortunately is."

"Oh, I see," said Maud; "but really, Lord Kippendale, I must not waste more of your time, and these books must positively settle down again to a respectable existence on their shelves: they have led a vagabond life for quite long enough."

Maud's interest in the mines was by no means exhausted, but Lord Kippendale's patience very evidently was. After he had left her, Maud proceeded with some difficulty to restore the various volumes to their places. It was not a joking matter by any means; for, as Lord Kippendale had said, the books had not been looked after for years. It was

a fairly large collection of mostly venerable-looking volumes; but as the old Earl himself confined his reading principally to "Jorrock's" and the sporting news, as Nicky never opened a book of any sort, and as Lady Baby found her time amply filled by Mudie's box, it followed that occasional stray visitors were the only people interested in the library shelves; and stray visitors are not generally remarkable for their conscientiousness in replacing any particular volume in exactly the place they take it from. It was no wonder, therefore, that the Kippendale library was a rather maddening place for any one who happened to be conscientious in this respect; that some shelves were overcrowded and others underfilled; that gaps were stopped up with bundles of newspapers, thrust there at random, while tables were littered with the rightful occupants of these gaps; that as many volumes stood upon their heads as upon their heels; that what had once been happy pairs now led a solitary existence upon widely separated shelves; and that what had once been united families found themselves so ruth-

lessly torn asunder and so recklessly scattered, that all hopes of reunion must long since have abandoned their papery and somewhat musty hearts.

“It certainly would be a work of mercy,” mused Maud as she looked around her, “if any benevolent person would undertake to catalogue and arrange these books. I wonder how long it would take? A month—two months, perhaps; and it’s a thing that, once started, would have to be carried out to the very bitterest of bitter ends. Shall I be the benevolent person?” A minute later she shook her head. “Not quite yet. It might be very convenient for me to be sure of two months at Kippendale, or, possibly, it might be just a little inconvenient. A few days more, to see how matters are shaping themselves—just a few days more. As quantities are now distributed, it might turn out to be a mistake.” What Maud meant by this possible mistake was only the other end, as it were, of last night’s reflections. She was too wise to waste *either* time or energy upon what she now

frankly recognised to be a losing game. Sir Peter was slipping beyond her grasp, and she knew it. True, with time and trouble, passions had been evoked out of less promising materials even than this artistic admiration, which irritated her more than it flattered her; and had not some other elements entered into the question, Maud would undoubtedly have redoubled her efforts, taken all risks, and still have hoped for success. But her perceptions were exceptionally keen. She had become aware of a something new in the atmosphere, unsuspected by most of the others, and the conviction was borne in upon her, that if the retreat had to be made, this was the last possible moment for doing it with anything like dignity or grace.

As regards Sir Peter, therefore, the severed volumes on the shelves might just as well continue to mourn apart, or to groan under each other's weight. But there was also that "new conception," which had dawned in her mind last night at the moment of the opening of the door; and that was why Maud said "A few days, just a few days more."

Maud had not to wait many days before she got her second chance of picking up the sort of information she wanted.

Lord Kippendale appeared one morning at breakfast in an absolutely hilarious mood, and electrified Nicky by telling him that he might buy that team for himself which he had had his eye on for so long—might telegraph for it that very day if he liked.

“That means that you have had a nice letter from Gullyscoombe, I suppose, papa?” said Lady Baby; “and if it is really such a very nice letter, don’t you think that the pony-carriage you promised me for my birthday would look much nicer with two ponies than with one?”

“Eh? We’ll see, we’ll see,” said Lord Kippendale, gleefully pinching his daughter’s cheek. He had indeed had a very “nice” letter from Gullyscoombe. The copper was doing more than ordinarily well; also there had been a slight rise in the market, which had sent the price up higher than it had been for some years, *and which* promised to hold on for some time

longer. All this was discussed openly and fully during the greater part of breakfast, and Maud sat by, very attentive, but singularly silent.

After breakfast she retired to her own room, and that afternoon she suggested to Lady Baby that it would be a very good thing if a new catalogue were made of the books in the library.

CHAPTER VIII.

AJAX.

“ At first there's nothing to resist :
 He fights with all the forms of peace.

 And then, unlook'd for, strikes amain.”

ON the morning after the tableaux, both Sir Peter and Mr Carbury had given orders for their portmanteaus to be packed. Neither of them gave the order with much enthusiasm, but by mid-day both portmanteaus were strapped. After luncheon Sir Peter took his departure, but Mr Carbury, over-persuaded, apparently, told Williams to unpack his portmanteau again. He gave this order with much more alacrity than he had given the first. Having been a fortnight in the house, he had felt it incumbent on him to make at least “an offer at” departure;

but perhaps Lord Kippendale's broad and old-fashioned views of hospitality had removed his scruples, or perhaps Sir Peter's withdrawal from the scene had removed some other objection. For a week past Mr Carbury had felt aware that he was sinking into the background, and this discovery was, of course, extremely unpalatable.

Catherine had departed to her home in Bournemouth, but Aggie and Nicky were staying on at Kippendale.

The reason that Aggie and Nicky were not going yet, was that they had no fixed home to go to. Though Nicky always had a few horses standing in the Kippendale stables, and always could find a *pied-à-terre* in his father-in-law's house, yet the general course of the Craigtouns' life was of a semi-nomadic character.

When Mr Carbury decided to stay, Lady Baby thought it very good-natured of a "real London man," such as he was, to put up with a dull country visit, and she resolved to reward him by extra attention. So he was more frequently asked to join the ladies in their rides,

he was consulted about the clipping of Zet's mane, and his advice was taken in various minor equestrian matters. When this had gone on for a few days, Sir Peter drove over one afternoon to fetch a pet paint-brush which he had left at the house. Next day he came back for a cake of ultramarine, which it seemed had been dropped in the old schoolroom; and two days after that, he found that his best lamp-black had shared the same fate.

"How many colours are there in a paint-box?" asked Mr Carbury on the occasion of this third visit.

"I have seen them with as many as thirty-six," said Sir Peter, coolly. "Does the question interest you?"

"Not at all. I was only trying to make a rough calculation as to how many more times you would have to cross the Border."

"I am afraid your arithmetic will fall short," answered Sir Peter.

"Artists are always losing their things," put in Lady Agnes, who, being a woman, even if rather a stupid one, could not help scenting

danger in the air. "Ah! there is Frances all ready, and the horses are at the door."

Sir Peter went to the door to see them mount, and then watched them ride away. They made a pretty picture trotting away under the budding beech-trees, and the lines of the avenue were to Sir Peter no doubt as good as a practical lesson in perspective, for he stood and gazed at the prospect during several minutes. Last time he had come to the house he had not had even this much to look at, for the whole party had been out riding and did not return until he was on the point of departure. And it was the same thing every time he came: the ladies had just gone out riding, or were just going. He never saw them but in their habits, and seldom except in the saddle. Once, it is true, he had been told that Miss Epperton was in the library, and, with his sketch-book in his hand, he had hopefully proceeded thither; but, to his disgust, he found Miss Epperton with a handkerchief tied over her head, a large apron over her dress, and enveloped in a cloud of dust, while Lord Germaine, on his knees beside

a small mountain-range of books, was vigorously wielding a feather-brush. Sir Peter hurriedly retired. It was quite evident that Miss Epperton was a great deal too busy to act as model just now.

At last one day as he was standing on the doorsteps, rather ruefully watching the start of the riders, Lady Baby seemed struck by the doleful expression of his face, for she checked her pony and asked him suddenly—"Do you think you are too old to learn?"

"To learn what?"

"To learn to ride. You might take lessons."

"From whom?"

"From me."

This seemed to put the matter in a new light, for, after a brief moment of stupefaction, he answered: "Perhaps you are right, and perhaps I am not too old to learn. I knew a fellow at Rome who began to take drawing-lessons at fifty, and he got to making very clever sketches—very clever indeed."

"I don't suppose you will ever make a really *good* rider," said Lady Baby cautiously, fearing

that she had awakened unduly sanguine expectations ; “ it certainly is too late a beginning for that. I began at five, you see.”

“ So did I, but I left off at fifteen. But after all, it is just possible that those bitter lessons of my tortured infancy may have left some traces behind them—a sort of foundation to start upon.”

“ Well, we can try,” said Lady Baby. “ Will you bring a horse from Nolesworth ? Of course you have plenty. I am always jealous of the Nolesworth horses. There’s a jewel of a little bay mare that has often made me wish the old Border customs had not quite died out,” and Lady Baby sighed regretfully ; “ and then your stables are much better than ours—you must have so much room there.”

“ Lots of room,” assented Sir Peter ; “ in fact, there is nothing but room there at present.”

“ What on earth do you mean ? ”

“ I mean that the stables are empty ; there are no horses.”

“ No horses ? ”

“ No, not even the tail of one. I made

arrangements last week for selling my father's stud, and I intend in future to keep only carriage-horses of the very meekest description."

"Sold your father's stud!" almost shouted Nicky, with a stare of horror at the speaker—"What the dev—I mean why?"

"Why? Because upon reflection I found that it was scarcely worth while keeping fifteen horses and six grooms, and spending two thousand a-year, in order to break into a cold perspiration each time I came in sight of a fence. I did not think that the result quite justified the expense."

"Sir Peter! Sir Peter!" cried Lady Baby, "this is even worse than I thought! I am afraid you will never learn, after all."

"But you said I was worth a trial," urged Sir Peter, who now, contradictiously enough, seemed determined to have his riding-lessons, "and I am not going to let you off your word. Surely you will be kind enough to lend me a mount, since there is nothing at Nolesworth but the old rocking-horse in my brothers' nursery."

"I can lend you a live rocking-horse," said Lady Baby.

Next day orders were given for Ajax to be saddled. Ajax, *alias* the rocking-horse, was Lady Agnes's special steed, somewhat on the same scale as Lady Agnes herself, and quite the quietest horse in the Kippendale stables. He was an ancient animal by this time, very knowing in his ways, and very cool in his head; entirely to be relied upon for picking his way along the roughest of roads, finding the easiest passage through a broken hedge, or similar questions of delicate equine judgment; but most of all to be relied upon for not taking the smallest atom of unnecessary trouble to himself upon any occasion whatever. For though Ajax had lived through a fiery youth, he had long since settled into the wisdom of age. In colour Ajax was a rather pale chestnut; in power it will be enough to say that he was up to Lady Agnes's weight. His general appearance had something unlike the modern horse, something semi-heraldic, semi-historical about it.

"I'd no' tak' it on me to be ower positive about onything," said Adam, the old groom, as he limped rheumatically across the stable-yard, "but I canna help thinking that things is takin' a kin' o' a queer turn. M' Leddy Baby gi'en orders for A Jacks" (this was Adam's way of viewin' old Greek) "to be saddled for Sir Peter Wyndhurst, and him to be ta'en oot first, for fear o' him bein' ower fresh. I thoct m' Leddy Baby wad hae kent A Jacks a wee bit better nor that. Hi there, lads! Gie me my leg-up." What Adam elegantly termed his "leg-up" was in reality a wooden chair, without which his stiffened joints could no longer hoist him into the saddle; but he had not yet brought himself to ask for the chair *as* a chair—he preferred the sound of the paraphrase. Adam's age was sixty in point of years, but he was never seen as a man of sixty; for on foot he was fully eighty, and on horseback he was barely forty.

This was the same groom whose family history had been marked by the semi-tragical *diamond-scene* recounted by Lady Baby; but

the incident had left little trace upon him, or rather, its memory consisted solely in the indignation of a sternly and somewhat grimly honest man at the trickery and worthlessness of the woman he had married. And the trickery was all the more abominable to him as having been practised against one of "the family." She had been lovely, and he had wooed her with ardour, and won her with rapture; but from the day that, deaf to all intercession, he had turned her out of doors, he had never seen her face again, though she had survived her disgrace for ten years. As for forgiving her after she was dead, or at least making allowances for extreme youth and giddiness, the idea had never so much as occurred to him.

"Is that animal quite tame?" inquired Sir Peter, as Ajax clattered into the stone-paved porch—for he always made a point of quitting his stables with a mock-show of being irrepressible. It was a harmless little joke which deceived no one who knew him, and which appeared to amuse his senile mind.

"Same as a arm-cheer upon wheels, sir," an-

swered Adam, with a faint but deadly smile of scorn.

"Thanks; that is reassuring. From an artistic point of view he looks at this moment more like a dragon spitting fire than an arm-chair. Is this the right way to take the bridle? Which leg must go up first?"

"That's right!" chuckled Lord Kippendale; "try again. I believe you'll make a rider yet."

"Would you like a ladder?" asked Maud from the doorstep, not sorry to shoot an arrow of sarcasm at the man who had refused to be wounded by the other sort of arrow.

"And a leading-rein?" suggested Mr Carbury, who likewise had come out to see the start. They were all looking on, each person with a different sort of smile on his or her lips. Even Zet, the black pony, who always looked like the incarnation of equine impudence, seemed to have an ironical gleam in the corners of his mischievous eyes.

"Don't speak all at once, or you will flurry me," said Sir Peter, looking singularly un-

flurried. "Now, memories of my childhood, come to my aid!"

They came to his aid apparently, for in the next moment, rather to his own surprise, he found himself in the saddle.

"There! it's done! Thanks every one for their kind assistance and advice. Germaine, if I happen not to return, bear in mind that my keys are in my writing-table drawer.

The first riding-lesson was to be confined to the inner park, and for this Adam was considered as sufficient chaperon.

"Your seat is really not so very bad," said Lady Baby, as pupil and mistress moved down the avenue side by side. "You are actually sitting straight."

"It is all a snare and a delusion, I assure you: it may commend itself to the eye, but a feather would knock me off. The unfortunate fact of my sitting straight on horseback was the chief cause of my sufferings as a child. Somebody once had the cruel idea of saying that my seat was graceful; I have never been able to think of that person with any charity since. He

confirmed my father in his treatment of me by giving him vain hopes."

"Sir Peter, are you not sometimes given to drawing slightly on your imagination?" asked Lady Baby, with a mistrustful glance. "If half you say were true, you ought to be feeling nervous now, and you look quite calm."

"I always do; it is the calmness of despair. Do not trust to appearances. My position is most insecure."

The distress on Lady Baby's face turned to consternation. "If you really should feel like falling off, remember to take hold of Ajax's mane."

"I have been looking at his mane with a view to that already," said Sir Peter, "but he does not seem to have much mane remaining. The animal has some artistic possibilities about him; they lie, I think, in the antique line. I perceive a dash of the wooden Trojan horse, and at times I catch a glimmer of something Pompeian. Yes, he is very like a horse in a Pompeian frieze—a *slightly* dilapidated bas-relief, with bits chipped

away, and, unluckily for me, the bit with the mane is gone."

"Do pay attention to your reins," said Lady Baby; "you talk a great deal too much for a beginner. We might try a slow trot, but remember about the mane."

They tried a slow trot, at the end of which Ajax found it proper to fall into one of his smooth rocking-horse canters, which gave him less trouble than any other pace. "If riding is nothing worse than this," said Sir Peter, "I think I could get blunted to it in time."

They drew rein at the end of the park and slowly began to retrace their way, for the first lesson was to be a short one. They were in a mossy path between the trees; above their heads the branches met, the daisies were thickly strewn now, and the hedges were strung with the pearls of hawthorn-buds. Lady Baby broke a branch in passing and stuck it through her saddle-strap. Her eyes were shining with the intense but serious look of enjoyment, which her favourite pastime always kindled there. Her delight was never wont to vent itself in laughter and smiles,

and, even as a child, she had never screamed with joy over a new toy. It was in the moments of her greatest delight that she grew the gravest, and in proportion that her enjoyment was deep it was repressed.

They rode for a little time in silence, Ajax profiting by his relaxed reins to make a hearty meal off the young beech-leaves within reach.

"I think some of it will be out for my birthday," said Lady Baby presently, plucking idly at the hawthorn-boughs. "I shall be seventeen on my birthday."

"Really? So much as that? Are you going to have a birthday cake?"

"Certainly not. I stopped my birthday cakes when I was twelve years old. I am going to have a picnic. I have one every year. You will come to it, of course; I take that for granted."

"A picnic in the open air?" inquired Sir Peter.

"Of course. Why?"

"Nothing; I was only trying to remember whether I brought an overcoat down with me."

"You can drink your tea at home, if you like," she retorted, bridling again on the instant.

"I shall drink it in the open air, or perish in the attempt. But don't you think that a Scotch picnic in May is rather a reckless idea?"

"No, I don't," said Lady Baby, and of course that settled the matter.

"I'm no' wishin' to be ower positive," said Adam, when he found himself in the stable-yard again at the end of that first ride—"I'm no' wishin' to be ower positive aboot onything whatever; but if I could find it in me to mak' an assairtion, I'd say there was a deal o' mischief in the wind. Hi, lads, here! Gie me my leg-doon!"

"Is it the east wind or the west wind the mischief blows from?" asked the precocious youngster who brought the required chair.

"The Hurst wind," said Adam, with a convulsive effort at a joke, and a stare which put even the precocious stable-boy out of countenance. "'Tis in the Hurst wind that the mischief sits," he repeated, grimly pleased with his newly coined word. "Ay, to think that

my eyes sud hae lived to see a Wyndhurst puttin' the wrang foot foremost i' the stirrup, and to think that my ears sud hae lived to hear a Wyndhurst speirin' which way to tak' up the rein! If it had been ane o' oor ain fam'ly, it 'ud hae broke my hert richt oot; but as it's ane o' the English castle folk, it's jist graand!"

All this part of the matter was eminently satisfactory to Adam; for in the tacit feud between the two families he had always played a respectful but enthusiastic part. The pleasure of stirring up, in "oor ain fam'ly," those embers of rivalry which had sometimes seemed in danger of smouldering, had been for long his keenest enjoyment; and this interest had amply made up for the loss of the domestic interest of which he had had so slight a taste. "And to think," said Adam, with a sort of withered cackle which did duty with him for a laugh, and which amply sufficed for his requirements of hilarity,—“to think that yon Sir Peter had the same faither wi' thae bits o' laddies whase ridin' has riled me so sair, mony's the day!" Often upon hunting

days, when Adam had met these same "bits o' lads" on their "bits o' ponies," had he painfully studied the clouds for fear lest they should be daft enough to fancy that their budding horsemanship could have any power to extort his admiration. And then, when he had let the tiny riders go by as though they were the emptiest of empty air, would he whip behind a hedge, and from behind that shelter his keen old eyes would follow the small enemies with eager scrutiny. Sometimes, secure of being unwitnessed, he would permit himself the relaxation of an approving smile; or when some particularly small boy had emerged, still in company with his pony, from some particularly big ditch, Adam, in a torment of mixed feelings, would groan out to the hedges that sheltered him: "Ay, but they can ride, thae Wynnhurst lads!" Neither rack nor thumbscrew would have wrung the same remark from him anywhere within reach of mortal ears. Therefore, to find one of the "English castle folk" sunk so low as was Sir Peter, was grimly gratifying to Adam; but any symptom of hostilities ceasing was to him as

gall and wormwood, and there had been more than one symptom lately. Adam declined to be positive on any point whatever, but he remained of opinion that there was "a sicht o' mischief" brewing.

Next day Sir Peter had another lesson, and on the day after that again another. Mr Carbury thought once more of having his portman-teau packed, but only thought of it and let it alone. The riding-lessons somehow tried his temper; they had not turned out as he expected. It had seemed to him almost incredible that a sane man should deliberately propose to make an exhibition of his unskilfulness. Mr Carbury himself would never have mounted a horse if he had known his horsemanship to be anything short of first class. He had promised himself something almost like enjoyment in the spectacle of Sir Peter on horseback. It was Sir Peter's vanity which was to be mortified, not his own. But his very first glimpse of Sir Peter in the saddle had been a distinct disappointment. Whatever mistakes he might make, however ludicrous an inexperience he

might betray, the joke, instead of being on the side of the spectators, was always on the side of the tyro in horsemanship. No laughter seemed to ruffle him, no criticism to put him out of countenance.

While matters were at this juncture, Lady Agnes, sitting alone in her room one afternoon, heard hurried steps stumbling up the staircase, and in the next moment Lady Baby, looking rather wild and breathless, stood upon the threshold.

"Nicky? has anything happened to Nicky?" was Agnes's instinctive question; for it was scarcely half an hour since pupil and teacher, under Nicky's protection, had left the house.

"Nothing; no, it is not Nicky," panted Lady Baby. "I don't know where Nicky is. He—he—oh, Agnes, he has done it!"

"Who has done what?"

"Sir Peter. He has proposed to me."

"Proposed to you? Asked you to marry him? *Already?*"

"Yes, asked me to marry him. Can you believe it?"

"No, scarcely ; you have only known him three weeks ! It is so peculiar !"

"Is it only three weeks ? I thought it was much longer. Never mind about the time ; you are always so punctilious about doing things exactly like everybody else. That is not the point. The point is his daring to propose to me at all."

"But how did he do it ?" asked Agnes, still plunged in ponderous bewilderment, not so much at Sir Peter's proposing, but at his proposing so quickly. "Was not Nicky there ?"

"Nicky ? No. I don't know where Nicky was. He started with us, but afterwards he said something about giving Suleika a gallop round a ploughed field, so as to take it out of her, for she was standing on her hind legs more than usual to-day ; and he said he would rejoin us higher up, and he took the gallop, but somehow he didn't rejoin us, and then, before I knew where I was, Sir Peter had proposed to me. Agnes, would you mind telling me how Nicky proposed to you ? What did he say ?" *Lady Baby* had pulled off her hat to cool her

forehead, and, with the end of her habit thrown over her arm, was rapidly pacing the room.

"Nicky didn't say very much," replied Agnes, lowering her ample eyelids over her saucer eyes. "I think he said: 'Agnes, I should be the luckiest fellow in the world if you would consent to gallop on with me this way through life.'"

"You were galloping at the moment, I suppose?"

"Yes; and then he got his horse quite close to mine and took my hand and pressed it. I think he would have kissed it, only that his horse was pulling so."

"Well, Sir Peter didn't do it like that at all, and of course he couldn't go in for acrobatic feats on horseback, like Nicky. I wonder how George proposed to Catherine?" (the defunct Mr Blashford's name had been George.) "Listen, Agnes: it was just after Nicky left us; we were riding along quite slowly, and I was trying to explain to Sir Peter the theory of leaping. Then we came to a lovely little fence, which looked as if it had been put there on purpose to be used as an illustration, so I just took Zet over it, while

Sir Peter looked on, and then suddenly I heard a strange voice saying, 'Capital figure for the paper-hoop business!' and I saw a fat little red-faced man leaning against the paling and watching me. Of course I gave him a withering glance. When I got back to Sir Peter he was biting his lips, and he asked whether I wished him to get off and box the man's ears; and when I asked what for, he said, 'For thinking aloud; it is bad taste to think aloud.' I told him I could take care of myself, and he gave a smile—somehow, Agnes, it was a very enraging smile—and when we had ridden on a little way he said, 'Do you mean to take care of yourself all your life?' I asked him what he meant; and he said he meant that possibly somebody else might wish to take care of me, and had it never occurred to me that people sometimes get married? I answered that of course it had occurred to me often, and that I supposed I should get married some day, just like most other people. Then Sir Peter said, 'And have you made up your mind as to what *sort* of a husband you would like best?' It

sounded exactly as if he were asking me whether I would like a wax or a china doll best."

"And what did you say?" asked Agnes, breathless.

"I told him that my mind had been long made up, and that of course, in the first place, my husband must ride straight across country, and, in the second place, be an excellent shot; and that, though I would not positively stipulate that he should be strong enough to hold plunging horses with his bare hand in their nostrils, as Nicky does, still that I wanted him to be as like Nicky as possible in that way; and in the middle of it all, while I was drawing breath in my description, the man quietly asked me to marry him. I thought I should have fallen off my pony with the surprise. I asked him to repeat his words, and he said, 'Yes, I am asking you to marry me; but there is no reason for looking scared,—of course you need not do it unless you like.'"

"And you refused him?" murmured Agnes.

"Agnes!" cried Lady Baby, stopping short in her walk, and turning a pair of indignant

blue eyes upon her sister,—“refused him? What else could I possibly have done? A man who only cares for horses on pictures and bas-reliefs—what possible bond of sympathy could exist between us? Surely Agnes, you must be forgetting.”

“Yes, to be sure,” said Agnes, doubtfully; “but Nicky was saying the other day——”

“What was Nicky saying?”

“That—that many girls would give a good deal for the chance of marrying Sir Peter.”

“Nicky didn’t know what he was talking about; Nicky shouldn’t talk, he should only ride; and besides, he undervalues himself. Don’t you remember my always saying that nothing but a second Nicky would do for me? Don’t you remember my saying that, Agnes?” and Lady Baby’s riding-whip impatiently tapped her boot.

Agnes hastened to remember. “Yes, yes, Frances, I know; and of course, none of us ever thought of your marrying Sir Peter unless you cared for him.”

“*Cared* for him!” echoed Lady Baby, with

a rather hysterical laugh ; “ as if *that* was the sort of man I was likely to care for ! And you know quite well that it isn’t the riding alone—there are thousands of other things. He doesn’t know anything about breech-loaders or matchlocks, and he takes snipe for woodcock, and partridge for grouse ; yes, and I don’t believe he had ever heard the word ‘covert-shooting’ before he came here, and he calls moors ‘pretty bits of colour’ ; and the other day, when we were walking across the heather—I wish you had seen him, Agnes—he kept looking down in a distressed way at his feet, and at last he asked papa why he did not keep the grass better cut in these places. You should have seen papa’s face ! And this is the man who asks me to marry him ! Agnes, it is dreadful ! ”

“ But, Baby dear, don’t excite yourself,” said Agnes, who could not help recognising that perhaps it was not so very dreadful after all ; “ since you have refused him, it is all right now.”

“ Oh yes, of course, *now* it is all right ; ” and stopping beside her sister, Lady Baby flung herself on her knees, and put down her head

on Agnes's lap. She was in the habit of flinging herself down in this way occasionally, when she was particularly in want of being agreed with and petted. Agnes was so good at agreeing, and there was something vast and solid about her personality which made it pleasant to use her as a pillow. And she liked being used as a pillow, perhaps because it was her vocation in life. She had a well-stuffed pillow's properly regulated softness, and not much more than a pillow's emotions. If there were not a fair supply of some such comfortable cushions as Agnes to pad the walls of human society, and to be leant upon and fallen upon, and punched and pinched *ad libitum*, then a good many more of us would dash out our brains and scratch our nails bloody against the walls of this great closed madhouse which we call the world.

Agnes put a large, white hand down tenderly upon Lady Baby's untidy head. She had no children of her own, and her younger sister came in for a large share in the big fund of her unclaimed motherly affection.

"Baby," she said in alarm, "you are crying!"

"No, I am not crying; and why shouldn't I cry when it is all so provoking? I wish we had never made friends with Sir Peter. The old rules were quite right after all, and no good ever comes of Borderers making friends; and I told him so, too, or something very like it. For although I distinctly said no, very distinctly indeed, somehow he didn't seem to take it quite seriously, and that made me so angry that I think I lost my head a little, and I told him that if I had known it would come to this, I would have walked home through the rain from Nolesworth that day, rather than have put foot within his house."

"Oh, Frances, that was rather cruel! How did he take it?"

Lady Baby suddenly sprang to her feet. "Good heavens, Agnes! it has only just struck me. I don't know how he took it. I didn't wait to see him take it, for I was so irritated by that time that I just turned Zet's head and galloped away, and I quite forgot how he was to get home by himself, and Ajax was

rather skittish to-day. Oh, Agnes, I wonder if he can manage him ? ”

“ Here is Nicky,” said Agnes, in great relief. “ Baby, I suppose Nicky may know ? ”

“ Yes, yes, anything you like ; but ask him whether he has seen Sir Peter.”

“ I’ve seen him,” said Nicky, sulkily ; “ he’s right enough.”

“ And, Nicky, Frances has just refused him.”

“ Then Frances has done a deuced stupid thing,” said Nicky, savagely.

“ What, Nicky ! you too ? even you ? ” cried Lady Baby, aghast. “ What do you mean ? ”

“ I mean that Wyndhurst has thirty thousand a-year, said Nicky, doggedly ; “ that’s what I mean, and not a bad thing to mean either.”

Lady Baby cast upon her ideal brother-in-law one long look of the blankest consternation, and then abruptly left the room.

Though his own Agnes had married him for his sweet and penniless self alone, Nicky Craigtoun was acutely awake to the value of money, and had more than once reflected that a wealthy *brother-in-law* would be an uncommonly valu-

able acquisition, and probably a more tractable article than even a wealthy father-in-law. In his opinion Sir Peter was a muff; but for all that, Lady Baby had done a deuced stupid thing in refusing him. And since Nicky thought so, of course Agnes had no choice but to think so too. She began to take this view of the matter into more serious consideration.

CHAPTER IX.

THE "DOWSING-ROD."

"Why, 'tis the rarest argument of wonder that hath shot out in our latter times!"

"WHAT is it?" asked Maud, in deep perplexity, turning over between her fingers an object that looked very much like an ordinary dead twig. "Lord Germaine, I really can't guess."

"I am quite sure you can if you try," said the young man, with a sort of bashful bluntness that sat oddly, yet not unbecomingly, upon him. "You can do anything you try to do."

Germaine was a big young man,—very big and very young; a good deal bigger than his five-feet-eleven, and a good deal younger than *his* twenty-two years. With his obstinately

curly hair, lying in silky, gold rings on his head, his wide-open eyes of an infantine blue, his large unformed hands, still bearing the traces of dimples about the knuckles, he looked like the rough outline-sketch of a giant—a sketch which nature might perhaps by-and-by fill in to a very fine picture, but which was as yet nothing more than a sketch. In his face Germaine had a little of each of his three sisters: when he stared, he was like Agnes; when he smiled, he was like Lady Baby; and when the corners of his mouth went down, as they were apt to do on occasion, he looked like an enlarged copy of Catherine.

"It certainly is not a riding-whip," said Maud, still examining the enigmatical twig, which was forked at one end, and had evidently at some remote time been cut from either a hazel or a white-thorn bush. It was in the course of the tidying process in the library that a bundle of these mysterious dry twigs had come to light at the back of a drawer. "I don't suppose it is a wizard's wand; really it seems to be just what I called

it, a common stick. Lord Germaine, I give it up."

"Well, it *is* a common stick, if you like, and yet it isn't a common stick. It's a divining-rod, you know; they call it a 'dowsing'-rod down there."

"A divining-rod! And are the people 'down there' (which I suppose means Gullyscoombe) actually benighted enough to cling to such a piece of decayed superstition as a divining-rod?"

"Decayed superstition?" repeated Germaine, tearing open his eyes a little wider, just as though they were not big enough already.

"Yes, which means foolish belief, or absurd delusion." Maud had long ere this discovered that the plainer words she used, the better did she get on with this young man. "I thought that the very word 'divining-rod' was banished from the vocabulary of all but the most gullible of rustics."

"Then you think it is wrong to believe in divining-rods?"

"I think it is worse than wrong; I think

it is silly." This answer seemed to trouble Germaine greatly. "Worse than wrong?" he began. How can anything——"

But Maud broke in with an impatient laugh. "Why, you look almost as though you were a secret worshipper of the 'dowsing-rod' yourself!"

Germaine, in genuine misery, balanced himself heavily on one foot, and then on the other. It was great agony to him to brand himself in Miss Epperton's eyes as a "gullible rustic"; but it would have been greater agony to render himself guilty of even an indirect evasion of the truth. "I—I—yes, I always *did* think there was something in it," he stammered, blushing like a schoolgirl, as he plunged resolutely through his confession, but bravely keeping himself from devoting his gaze to his shooting-boots, as he was secretly yearning to do.

"But it is quite an exploded theory," said Maud, speaking with that forbearing patience which generally answers best in the treatment of unreasonable children.

"I don't quite know what that means, but I know that every one swears by it down there; and even Captain John, who is awfully clever about mines, won't say that he thinks it's nonsense."

"Won't he? Well, that lowers Captain John very considerably in my estimation. What's the way to get hold of the thing? There is an orthodox way, I suppose; and if you miss it by a hair's-breadth, your failure is of course put down to your having had your little finger where your forefinger should have been, or to having blinked your eyes or dared to draw a breath just at the wrong moment; so it is quite impossible that the rod should be to blame. Is this the way?"

It was not the way, however, for the forked ends were the ones to be held, as Germaine explained; and the searcher for hidden metals was to rest his two hands against his sides, keeping the rod before him at a given angle—very difficult to hit off, and almost impossible to maintain when once hit off. And Maud, though she did not believe in the divining-rod,

had no objection at all to going through the amusing farce under Germaine's directions.

"Well, it is very clear that we have either not got 'the virtue,' or else that there is no gold hidden under *this* carpet," she said at the end of ten minutes, during which they had both been gravely pacing the floor in the prescribed attitude. "My rod has not got an idea in its head. How is yours getting on?"

"I have broken it into three pieces," said Germaine, ruefully; "but I suppose that's my own fault. Somebody once said that my fingers were all thumbs."

"Well, in this case I should absolve your fingers. I had to handle my own stick just as though it were made of spun glass. If you *do* go in for 'dowsing-rods,' I should advise keeping some rather less brittle specimens in stock."

"But they are not mere specimens, you see," explained Germaine; "these rods are rather mixed up with the diamond story. They told you about the diamonds, didn't they? and about that villain Christopher Swan? Well,

on the day after the robbery, when they searched his room, they didn't find the diamonds, of course, but they found these rods. Swan had always had the name of being a first-rate hand at the dowsing-rod, and at any rate he knew more about the minerals on the estate than even Captain John himself. And somehow it seems that not long before he disappeared, the report had got about that he had hit upon a new copper-vein somewhere about Gullyscoombe."

"Which one of these very rods was supposed to have pointed out?" suggested Maud, derisively.

"Yes, exactly; and as they didn't know which was which——"

"I see; and as it would have been an enormous pity to risk the chance of lightly casting aside so valuable a relic, it was thought safer to preserve the whole bundle; is that so?"

"That is just how it was; you put it so much better than I could. It was Captain John himself who brought the rods to my

father, and my father kept them as a curiosity. I don't know whether he believed in the rods, but I know that he believed in Swan's copper."

Maud had once or twice before this heard a casual reference to "Swan's copper." At first she had understood it to be one of the working mines, but had afterwards found out that this designation was applied to a copper-vein whose existence was rather hazily believed in, but the site of which had never been properly explored, apparently for no other reason than that the "Bluebells" were sending up metal enough for the market demand—the average price of copper in those years not being such as to make it particularly advisable to face all the risks of an additional enterprise.

"And do you believe in Swan's copper?" asked Maud.

"Yes, I do. Swan was always pottering about the place; there is no reason why he shouldn't have spotted a vein. And he always was full of mysteries and secrets. Uncle Ronald used to call him the 'sly and sleekit un.'"

"And does it not strike you as much more likely that the 'sly and sleekit one' should have chanced upon this hidden treasure while pottering about the place, rather than insist on giving the merit to this little bit of twig?"

"I suppose it is more likely," said Germaine, humbly; "it is sure to be if you say so."

And then for a minute the infatuated youth struggled hard to get together something appropriate about there being other sorts of treasures, infinitely more precious than copper or tin, or even silver and gold, and which could only be pointed out by quite another sort of divining-rod. He had a dim notion that the materials for turning a neat compliment were there, but by no manner of means could he get them into shape, and after a moment of painful indecision was reduced to saying with a sigh, "Nobody ever put it in that light to me before; but then I don't suppose that many people in the world know as many things as you do, or are as clever as you are."

"No, I don't suppose so either," said Maud, *drily*; "at any rate, I am pretty sure that

very few people have had such good cause to practise their wits as I have had, and it is practice that makes perfect, you know."

"Is it? Then what a lot of practice you must have had in—in being kind to people. Nobody ever was so kind to me as you are, and nobody has ever had such a lot of patience with me. I know I'm dull, I know I'm slow, I know I can't talk, and yet you let me talk to you as much as I like!" cried Germaine, getting a little mixed.

"Perhaps," suggested Maud, with a slight contraction of her lips, "that is because I have no one else to talk to?"

"You might have the whole world to talk to, if you chose; and yet you never tell me that I bore you, and you never tell me that I'm in the way——"

"If you knock over that inkstand, I will most decidedly tell you that you are in the way,"—and she sharply drew back the hand towards which Germaine had made a sudden vigorous lunge across the table. "There, I told you so; it is over!"

"I am the most confounded fool in Christendom," stammered Germaine, plunged back all at once into his native bashfulness, from which his ardour had for a moment lifted him. "Is it on your dress? Oh, it's only on the carpet. How good you are about it! I wish you would scold me. I suppose I had better not try to do anything to it; hadn't I better tell somebody to wipe it up?" And, covered with blushes, Germaine left the presence of his siren, and thundered down the staircase to bury his confusion in the smoking-room.

Maud likewise sought a retired spot. She had upset no inkstand, and yet she was fully as confused as was Germaine.

"In my grasp," she murmured, "in my grasp already. He will speak any day I choose; but it is too early. Am I not quite satisfied? I suppose I am,—but still——"

Perhaps it was the very ease of the conquest that faintly marred her satisfaction. She had entered on this campaign, as she had entered on many others, with thought and *circumspection*, with prudence and wile. She had

begun by mustering her forces and sharpening her weapons, and had looked her victim all over, intent, as it were, on giving "the local wound a name." But see there, before even the point had been fixed, or her position adopted, the victim had shown that he was stricken already, and stricken mortally. There was no object in threatening one who was so ready to die, and no zest in convincing one who was more than half convinced.

This attitude was something new to Maud, and it disconcerted her. She was used to owing her victories quite as much to her wit as to her beauty; but here it seemed that wit was superfluous, and that coquetry was almost too effective to be safe. Experienced though she was, it almost took her breath away to see how the most careless motion of her white hand could command the staying or going, the delight or misery, of this young, blunt-spoken, blue-eyed giant, or to mark how he trembled and coloured, and yet in the midst of his bashfulness grew so daring, when she attempted to practise upon him one of her

famous long glances. With this special type of glance—it consisted in a peculiarly slow unveiling of the eyes—Maud had slain many victims. In the circle of Miss Epperton's acquaintances it was known as "the eyelash trick," or sometimes as "the Epperton glance." It had been imitated, of course, but generally with little success. In this case, after a few attempts, Maud had given up using it, for it worked too alarmingly well.

"If only he would not put such absolute faith in every word I say," she sighed, as with restless steps she paced the room. "No one has ever before so blindly believed in me. I am not accustomed to it. It makes me feel—I don't know what it makes me feel,—it puts me out. I don't like his eyes; they are too big and blue and honest—a great deal too honest. I cannot stand being trusted to this terrible degree. Credulous young fool! It is a shame to deceive children of that age. I have a great mind to throw up the whole game and go back to Brackton."

She dropped into a chair, and began ner-

vously twining the bracelet on her wrist. In the next minute she burst out laughing. "What? was it I who said that? Go back to Brackton? What for? To be asked by my affectionate aunt for how long I have come? And why? Because, forsooth, I have succeeded too well in Scotland, and have become too scrupulous to accept a coronet. I declare I have got a fit of the virtues. Steady, Maud, steady! No excitement, no passion, no impulses; I thought we had done with all that long ago. When once I am Lady Germaine, perhaps I can afford to keep a temper again."

CHAPTER X.

STELLA.

“ My glass shall not persuade me I am old,
So long as youth and thou are of one date.

THE “Dramatic Equestrian Entertainment, largely patronised by the Nobility and Gentry of the Neighbourhood,” which for several weeks past had been advertised on orange and purple play-bills, was on a certain day more largely patronised than usual. On the seats of honour, draped with red cloth, the Kippendale party found the greater number of their acquaintances already installed. There was only one chair left vacant, “for Nolesworth Castle,” explained the manager, a short red-faced man, in a shabby *dress-coat*.

"Agnes, will you please sit near the Nolesworth Castle chair?" said Lady Baby, drawing back. "I don't like draughts; and Agnes," she added in a whisper, "that is the same red-faced man who—who brought it all about the other day. Now I understand what he meant by paper-hoop business, and it doesn't look so very difficult either."

The performance had opened with an *entrée comique*, which somehow was not very comical, and consisted chiefly in some rather mild tricks played with a hollow cane and a peacock's feather. It was followed by the usual sylphides in short petticoats, and these by Madam Manageress in a primrose-coloured wig, and a habit blue as the sky in June, putting an equine skeleton through its paces.

Lady Baby looked on in grave but intense delight. "I think a circus is a delightful thing," she said to Mr Carbury. "Oh, do look at that clown!"

"Yes, I see him; he is going to pull away the chair from behind the other, and the other will come down on his back and kick up a

prodigious amount of sawdust, which will probably make us either sneeze or cough—possibly both; but it will bring down thunders of applause. There! didn't I tell you so? It is strange that they cannot let a man sit down quietly on a chair without all this fuss."

"It is very silly," said Lady Baby; "but I can't help laughing. Used you ever to laugh at these sort of things, Mr Carbury?"

"It must have been very long ago if I did. But I am *so* tired of clowns."

"Good heavens!" she said, turning upon him impatiently, "I am *so* tired of hearing you say that you are *so* tired of everything. Is there anything in the world that you are *not* tired of, Mr Carbury?"

"Yes," he said, with a swift glance into her face—"yes, there is one thing."

"And what is it?"

"I will tell you another time."

"Do you promise to tell me?"

"I promise to tell you," he said very low.

"Thanks," she murmured absently—for her *attention* was already taken up with the opening

of the "unparalleled aquatic ballet," which consisted in putting a fishing-net and an oar to every conceivable use to which fishing-nets and oars are *not* meant to be put.

The aquatic ballet was followed by a pause in the performances, and the Kippendale party left their seats to inspect the zoological branch of the establishment,—some five or six unhappy-looking tigers and panthers in iron cages at the back, as well as the crocodile about which Mr Carbury had shown himself so woefully uninterested. And here, in front of the panther cage, and in conversation with the keeper, they found Sir Peter. He had not been seen since the day of his last ride with Lady Baby. Lady Baby looked haughty and confused, Sir Peter looked unconcerned.

"I have been studying the artistic possibilities of this pretty little kitten," he observed, indicating a young and rather pale-coloured panther in the cage beside him. "She doesn't look like a convicted murderess, does she? But I hear distressing accounts of her."

"Half-grown specimen of royal Bengal pan-

ther," began the keeper, with a sort of spasmodic jerk, like an instrument freshly wound up ; "born in captivity named Stella native of India feeds on flesh and climbs trees one and a half years old present specimen is remarkable for the size of the black eye-patches. Not so near, sir ; she's the savagest beast we have." This was added in an everyday tone, and with quite a commonplace indication of punctuation, the remark not belonging to the programme ; for Nicky Craigtoun, in whom a certain bullying instinct was not wanting, had poked his cane at the recumbent panther's ribs.

"Ah ! that's better still, as a bit of action," said Sir Peter, as, with a terrific snarl of exasperation, Stella started to her feet, and stood with raised upper lip and murderous eyes, slowly moving her tail from side to side.

"Is the cage quite firm ?" asked Agnes.

"It's a bit weak about the hinges," said the keeper, placidly, "but it's good for another month or two. We used to keep her with the other panthers, but she came too expensive,

—killed her sister in December, and her mother in March; did it mighty neat too. Whist! one clap of her paw, and the old panther's eyes were a yard from her head—taken out just as complete as a pair of halfpenny marbles. Mr Martin was for shooting Stella; but he wasn't quite handy enough with his rifle, for directly as the young devil saw that the old one was too far gone to give back tit for tat, you couldn't have said Jack Robinson before she was on the top of her, and making herself very busy with the old one's paws. Mr Martin thought she was licking them; but she wasn't, she was biting them; she bit them clean through. I shouldn't stand so near, sir—I shouldn't indeed;" for Nicky and Stella were still showing their teeth at each other through the bars.

"Why, here you are," said Lord Kippendale, hurrying up; "I have been round the stable. Shocking collection of screws. What's the sight here? Why, Wyndhurst, haven't seen you to-night yet: haven't seen you for a good wee while, it strikes me. Tired of driving

over? But, of course, you're to be at the picnic? Birthday picnic, you know, eh? Got a card of invitation?"

"I believe I was invited," said Peter; "but I am not sure whether the invitation has not since, by implication, been retracted."

"Eh? What's that? Sounds like a conundrum. Of course we expect you on Thursday. In the meantime we had better get back to our seats; there's the next thing just coming on."

The next thing, and several other next things, came on; and the next thing after that was a general rush for the entrance. Lady Baby, a little in rear of the others, had just reached the open air when she heard herself addressed from behind. She turned, and saw Sir Peter.

"One word, if you please," said Sir Peter. "Will my coming spoil the picnic on Thursday?"

"I—I don't know. I suppose it can't be helped."

"It can easily be helped. There are a dozen excuses I can make."

"But it would spoil it more if—I mean if any one were to think that—that there had been anything."

"Then you prefer that I should come?"

"No—that is to say, it doesn't in the least matter ; besides, papa has asked you, you know."

In the next minute they had got separated, and Lady Baby, feeling somehow that her presence of mind had not been quite equal to the occasion, was following her sister into the carriage ; while Sir Peter, after a glance, half perplexity, half amusement, just shrugged his shoulders and went home.

Next day it was reported that one of the panthers had broken loose, and that all efforts at capture had hitherto failed. A reward was offered, panic-stricken villagers shut themselves into their houses, no children were seen playing on the roads, and most people thought it wiser to have a pistol about them. After three days the excitement rather abated. It was supposed that the panther had either starved to death on the hills, or else strayed too far to molest the

neighbourhood. At any rate, the cause was not considered sufficient to stand in the way of the Thursday birthday picnic. At a comparatively early hour Kippendale House was astir, and hampers were being packed and horses were being rubbed down, while the spotless blue of an ideal May sky seemed bent upon showing that a May picnic in Scotland was not such a very reckless idea after all.

The forenoon was taken up with discussing the arrangements for the afternoon. Lady Baby gave despotic orders to the housekeeper about the filling of hampers, without troubling herself to consider the feasibility or infeasibility of chocolate-cakes and jam-tarts being produced at a couple of hours' notice; and when they were produced, she naturally put it down to her own excellent household management, and not to Mrs Spunker's prudence and foresight. Nicky was anxious to drive the new team, and he was also anxious that Ajax should be offered to Sir Peter, for which reason Agnes was to have a seat in the drag. Mr Carbury was to be of the *riding-party* too, and so were Lady Baby and

her father. Lord Germaine had wished to drive Miss Epperton in the pony-carriage, but finally made the best of the back-seat of the drag, which, but for the vicinity of the grooms, would have made almost as good a paradise as the other.

Then there arose some question about the vehicle which was to carry the hampers. The dog-cart was suggested; but partly owing to the indisposition of one of the under-grooms, and partly to the want of extra hands for the new team, it appeared that the resources of the stable-yard were wellnigh exhausted. In fact, there remained no possible conductor for the dog-cart but one small stable-boy of tender years who was temporarily supplying the sick groom's place, and who, for this purpose, had been recently and suddenly promoted from the garden.

When this boy heard what was expected of him, he gave one deep gasp of terror, and then subsided into resignation. Until to-day he had never been called upon to do anything more "horsey" than to clean a stable-lantern, or to

fill a pail, or to drive anything more formidable than a wheelbarrow ; but he was a great deal too frightened of Lord Kippendale to say so ; and Lord Kippendale, who scarcely knew the boy by sight, simply concluded that, being in the stable-yard, he naturally knew how to drive a horse, and settled the matter off-hand. It was only just as he was turning away that the boy's face caught his attention.

"Bless me, the lad's in a funk !" he said, standing still. "Ever been out in the dog-cart before—eh ? Mind you don't bring the horse down. Know what to do when a horse comes down—eh ?"

"No, m' lord," said the boy, perspiring at every pore.

"Try to get him up again."

"And if I canna ?" asked the boy, breathing very hard.

"Then you just get out and sit on his head."

"Please, m' lord," inquired the wretched boy, "how long am I to sit ?"

"Till some one comes along the road."

The boy retired, gasping, and presently the whole party was in motion.

The site chosen for the picnic was the bank of a small lake, known as the White Loch. People might just as well have called it the Black Loch when they were about it, for if it suggested anything, it suggested blackness. A thick plantation of fir-trees surrounded it on three sides, standing close enough to turn the water black with their shadows, and producing altogether the effect of a picture drawn in ink. But the popular voice had decreed that this was the White Loch. Perhaps the name had been given before the fir-trees were planted; at any rate the name was there, and so were the fir-trees. On the least black side of this white loch—the side most free of fir-trees—the short fine grass was quite as dry as can be expected of Scotch grass in May. So, what between the really genial though slightly deceptive sunshine, and a large supply of substantial wraps, and with a still larger supply of animal spirits, it was quite possible to keep one's teeth from chattering, and even at moments to delude one's self

into the belief that one's circulation was in its normal condition. The bank at this spot shelved away at a most obliging angle, which favoured the unpacking of hampers, and did not encourage plates and tumblers in a downward course, or at least did so only to a reasonable degree. And then, though you might feel aware that your toes were chilled, there was a feast of brilliancy for the eyes; for the loch was not only black to-day, it was silver and golden—silver with flowering thorn, and golden with whin-flowers. It seemed almost as though all the whin-flowers of the country, like a party of vain village beauties, had collected to see their own faces here, and were jostling and elbowing each other as to who should have the best place at the mirror.

"I haven't had such a good birthday picnic for long," said Lady Baby; "last year we had to light the fire under an umbrella, and we all had sore throats next day."

"Well, my dear, this is not next day yet," said Lord Kippendale; "I won't answer for my *rheumatism*. Germaine, I wish you would give

a whistle to that dog; there's game in the wood."

The party were seated on the bank in an irregular circle, round the remains of the picnic feast, which had been a species of glorified, very much glorified, afternoon tea. It was just the pause before the moment of breaking up to take a stroll, while the servants should be left to repack the hampers. The eldest and most staid of the fox-hound puppies was sitting bolt upright on the edge of an unoccupied plaid, with roaming eyes and anxiously wrinkled brow, apparently weighed down by the conviction that the responsibility of the whole party's safety rested upon his youthful shoulders. His younger and more frivolous brother had withdrawn to the opposite side of the water, and there had discovered something lovely in the shape of a semi-decayed pheasant, to which he was earnestly devoting his undivided attention. The distance across the little scrap of a loch was so small that every movement of the dog was plainly visible.

Germaine, instead of whistling, uttered a

half - exclamation, and rose slowly to his knees.

"What is it?" asked Maud, with a start. "Please consider our nerves, Lord Germaine, and don't make exclamations without explaining them."

But, oddly enough, Germaine offered no explanation. He got up and threw a long keen glance across the water. Every one got up, without knowing why, and went close to the water's edge. What had first attracted Germaine's attention was a movement, a struggle among the tall heather on the opposite bank; then, before any one had even had time to shape a guess, the heather had ceased swaying and had parted, and out of it a head emerged; and immediately there stepped something large, and lean, and yellow, and stealthy—something that looked so strangely out of place among heather and hawthorn, that the first instinct of the spectators was to disbelieve their eyes. Mr Carbury was the one who said "The panther!" and then there was a moment of flurry.

"The panther? Which panther?" inquired

Lord Kippendale, whose sight was not so good as it used to be, and who always lost his temper when he failed to grasp any subject on the instant. "Didn't know we had started panthers in Scotland."

"It's the menagerie panther," said Mr Carbury; "and we haven't got a gun among us."

"The keeper's house!" cried Nicky. There was a keeper's house among the fir-trees, at a short distance.

"Yes, yes; the keeper's house!" said Lord Kippendale, beginning to fuss; "there's my express-rifle at the keeper's house; and take the girls there—they will be safe."

Nicky and Carbury were already racing for the rifle; Agnes and Miss Epperton disappeared among the trees, but Lady Baby did not move. She stood, looking very pale, and straining her eyes across the water. "I can't go," she said. "Brenda is going to be killed."

The panther was now presenting its broad-view to the party, its head slightly turned away, and its face towards the fox-hound puppy. The dog seemed too much dazed to fly

—too much dazed even to lower the awkward paw which he held hysterically poised in the air. He did not mean to dispute the question of the exquisitely decayed pheasant with this yellow monster; but neither did he know how gracefully to retreat from the position. A stiff and convulsive averting of the head was all that he could manage; but out of the corners of his agonised eyes his glance seemed nailed to the enemy's face.

"Is the keeper's house far off?" "Supposing the keeper is out?" "Supposing the express-rifle is not there after all?" Such suggestions and questions passed quickly among the three men who still stood by the water's edge.

"They might have been back fifty times," said Lord Kippendale.

"They are never coming!" cried Lady Baby; "and oh, the dog! I want the dog saved! He's just going to spring! Oh, Brenda! poor Brenda!" and she covered her eyes.

"Let us shout or make a noise, or something," said Lord Kippendale, frantic with the suspense.

"What for?" said Sir Peter. "In order to show the panther that we are here? She has not seen us yet; but it would not take her more than twenty seconds to scamper round that corner."

"Then let us all dash at her in a body," said Germaine, beginning wildly to pick up stones.

"And force her to kill one of us out of sheer terror, poor beast! There is a much simpler way than that: and really, as long as we don't cut our own throats, there is no cause for special excitement. Lord Germaine, I must beg you to leave those stones alone, unless you wish to endanger all our lives."

"But what are you going to do?" asked Germaine, dropping the stones. "I don't want to see that poor dog torn to pieces before my eyes."

"Neither do I," said Sir Peter.

"Is that rifle never coming?" fumed Lord Kippendale.

"Is he killed yet?" asked Lady Baby, who had thrown herself on the grass, and put both her hands over her eyes, so as not to see

Brenda's certain death. As soon as she had asked it she closed her ears, so as not to hear the answer ; then, after a minute, she removed her fingers and listened, still with tightly closed eyes. Every one had grown very quiet ; there were no more frantic suggestions being made. She heard Germaine say, " Why, what's he up to ? " Then she heard her father say, " The man's daft ! " and then again they were quiet. All at once there were hurrying steps, a few words, a dead pause, a click, and a quick double-shot, followed by a rolling sound and a splash, and then a long breath was drawn all round, and everybody spoke at once.

Lady Baby looked up. Both panther and dog were gone, and instead there was something yellow floating in the water, hard by the opposite bank, and Mr Carbury held a smoking gun in his hand. Then she perceived Sir Peter coming in a most leisurely fashion along the bank towards them, and holding Brenda, still limp with terror, comfortably tucked under his arm. He came up to her, and gently put down the dog by her side.

"How?" she stammered, looking from the dog to his face. "Why! I don't understand. Did you——?"

"Wyndhurst," said Lord Kippendale, who had grown very red in the face, "I thought you were a sensible man, but I see that you are just as harebrained as any other youngster of my acquaintance; and hang it, man, I like you all the better for it—and for a dog too!"

"It was not for the dog," said Sir Peter, smiling rather strangely.

"But I don't understand," said Lady Baby again, kneeling with both her arms tightly clasped round Brenda's neck.

Lord Kippendale turned almost savagely upon his daughter. "Don't you? Then it is time you did; it's only a little piece of politeness after all. You wanted the dog fetched away from the panther, didn't you? Well, it's only that Wyndhurst went and fetched him; picked him up like a kitten from beside its mother,—*picked him up*, I tell you. By the by, Wyndhurst, what would you have done if the keeper's wife had been a quarter of a minute later in

opening the door, or if the cartridges had not been quite handy? Made any plans for that contingency? Eh?"

"I suppose I should have attempted an argument with the enemy," said Sir Peter; "she appeared quite open to reason: didn't seem to care much, either, about being looked at straight in the face; also my cigar appeared to puzzle her."

"There was no need for any expenditure of heroism," said Mr Carbury, dropping the spent gun to the grass; "the dog was out of the line of shot, and the panther had not moved by an inch."

"I am truly grieved to have caused so much sensation," said Sir Peter, lighting a fresh cigar; "I knew it was ten to one in favour of that starved cat being too much astonished to do herself justice. If I had gone at her with a stick, I daresay she would be crunching my bones by this time. Suppose we look at her closer."

The dead panther had already been pulled out of the water by the servants. The thin yellow carcass lay stretched on the grass.

"It's Stella," said Nicky, stopping to examine the eye-patches.

"Yes, I saw it was Stella by the colour," said Sir Peter.

"And did you remember that Stella had knocked out her mother's eyes?" asked Germaine.

"Well, yes; it occurred to me when I was about two yards from her."

"You're a good shot, Carbury," said Lord Kippendale, putting his finger to the bullet-hole in Stella's shoulder.

Mr Carbury smiled, but it was not a joyful smile. He knew he was a good shot, and yet there was darkness in his heart. Though it was he who had shot the panther, he was quite aware that the glory of the day was Sir Peter's and not his; and it was a knowledge that made his vanity smart.

CHAPTER I.

THE UGLY FENCE.

*"My queen was crouching at my side,
By love unsceptred and brought low,
Her awful garb of maiden pride
All melted into tears like snow."*

THE darkness was still in Mr Carbury's heart as he mounted for the homeward ride. Was it wounded vanity alone which made him thus secretly writhe? And what had Sir Peter done which could wound any one's vanity? He had only shown a little ordinary courage, and a little not quite ordinary coolness. Nor was Mr Carbury aware of feeling any special surprise. He had never doubted Sir Peter's courage, even when Sir Peter was describing himself as "constitutionally timid." Men with courage of their own generally guess at the presence of courage

in others, and Mr Carbury's personal courage had never been called in question. There is a sort of freemasonry between brave men, which enables them to recognise each other, even without a test. It is a mistake to think that one man has to see another in such an emergency as a shipwreck or a fire in order to be convinced that he is not a coward. He may only have seen the other handing cups at afternoon tea, or he may only have spent half an hour in the smoking-room with him, and yet he may be able to form a pretty accurate guess as to how that other would behave in the shipwreck or the fire.

The homeward ride promised to be a very silent one on Mr Carbury's part, and his chief energies seemed devoted to ascertaining how much spur Suleika would put up with without rearing beyond control. There was some balm in the reflection that Sir Peter could not have sat through one of these plunges, which, as Mr Carbury was fully aware, only served to show off his own horsemanship to thrilling advantage. Sir Peter himself made some remark to this

effect, as he brought up the rear of the riding-party upon Ajax,—Ajax ambling along at its clock-work pace, “same as an arm-chair upon wheels,” according to Adam.

The conversation lay chiefly between Sir Peter and Lord Kippendale, for Lady Baby had lost both her colour and her speech since the affair with the panther. The sun had sunk behind the round shoulder of a hill, and it was beginning to grow chill now in good earnest.

Suddenly there was heard a cry of distress and the noise of some rapidly approaching vehicle, and on the road, which was scarcely a hundred yards off, there appeared a dog-cart, borne along at an alarming pace, with nothing but one small frantic-looking figure in it, upright, swaying from side to side, and tugging at the reins.

“It’s that fool of a lad!” exclaimed Lord Kippendale, “and he’s going to have the horse down after all; he’ll have him down like a shot, unless he’s stopped before the corner.”

“There is time to stop him,” said Mr Carbury.

"I wash my hands of it, though. That's a very ugly fence, and this horse would buy up the other a dozen times over. I say, Carbury, mind Suleika!" for the mare, answering to a cut of the whip, was bounding forward towards the "ugly fence" which separated the road from the field.

"The uglier the better," thought Carbury, as he put down his hands and steadied Suleika's head. Here was the chance he wanted, thrown on to his very path; here that cold-blooded baronet could not compete, and the glory must be his alone. On came the dog-cart, tearing along the road, while it looked just possible that Suleika, racing for the corner of the field, might yet arrive in time to intercept the runaway.

Matters, however, took a turn which Mr Carbury had not expected. Whether it was that the cold-blooded baronet had on his side a store of dormant vanity, or whether it was that the recollections of Ajax's youth were too much for the wisdom of Ajax's head at this tantalising moment, was never clearly ascertained; but at

any rate Lord Kippendale suddenly became aware that there was a second knight hurrying to the lad's relief.

"Hold hard!" shouted the old Earl. "Wyndhurst, hold hard! You can't do it. For goodness' sake, hold hard!"

But either Ajax or Sir Peter declined to hold hard, and the chestnut drew nearer to the fence.

The truth of the matter was that the first impulse had been given by Ajax alone. Sir Peter, sitting negligently, and with perilously long reins, as was his habit, found himself suddenly borne forward in the rear of Suleika. He was not conscious of any burning desire to imperil his neck for the sake of the boy's, but once started, the ardour of the race caught him. There is something contagious in sudden excitement, and in moments like this it seizes even on the least excitable men. So Sir Peter, instead of holding hard, set his teeth and looked to see what Mr Carbury was doing. Ajax's full gallop was such as could not have *unseated* a child, and really the thing did not

look so difficult after all. There was Suleika flying over the fence like a bird, and not touching so much as a splinter; he could not do better than exactly follow Mr Carbury's lead, and take the fence exactly where Mr Carbury had taken it.

But Sir Peter had reckoned without Ajax. That sage animal, though fully meaning to be even with that fence, meant to do it in his own way, for excitement in him was far from drowning prudence. He intended to reach the road, but he intended to reach it with as little trouble to himself as possible; and spying a place where the loss of the top-bar had lowered the fence by wellnigh a foot, Ajax made for that spot. Sir Peter, not understanding the intention, attempted to pull him round towards the place that Mr Carbury had cleared. Ajax persisted, Sir Peter persisted; the fence was reached, and unsteadily risen to; there was a scramble and a crash.

"Hold hard! hold hard!" Lord Kippendale was still shouting at the top of his voice, when already it was too late to hold at all. "I said

he couldn't do it, He's down! No, he isn't! Yes, he is!"

"He's killed!" said some one beside Lord Kippendale; and the next thing Lord Kippendale became aware of was that his daughter had likewise reached the fence, had sprung off her pony, and was bending over something that lay quite still on the grass.

When the old Earl got there too, he found that Lady Baby was crying.

"He's killed!" she was saying wildly. "He's dead; he doesn't move!" and she tried to loosen Sir Peter's necktie, but her fingers shook helplessly. Call people! get a doctor! Why isn't anybody here? Papa, is he dead? Tell me quick. Adam, is he dead? Why doesn't he move?"

"I'd no' tak' it on me to be positive," said Adam, who had been vainly endeavouring to dismount without the aid of his "leg-doan." "I couldna be positive, 'specially at this distance, but he's a gey queer colour. It couldna be ex-peckit otherwise when gentlemen as doesna ken *ae rein frae* anither tak's upon themsel's——"

"Adam, you're a fool!" she cried passionately. "Is he alive or dead!"

One of the younger grooms, who was kneeling on the grass, lifted Sir Peter's limp hand and let it fall again with a grave shake of the head.

"*Deid's* a big word, m' leddy," said Adam, grimly; "*deid's* a deal too positive a word for my liking, but he's far gone one way."

"Sir Peter! Sir Peter!" cried Lady Baby, and she flung herself down beside the insensible man. "No, you are not dead; I want you to look at me, I want you to speak to me! Sir Peter!"

"Tut, tut! let me see," said Lord Kippendale, dismounted by this time, and quite as much flurried by his daughter's singular conduct as by the accident which had caused it. Accidents were a commonplace to Lord Kippendale. Had he not seen men down in ditches and up again before it was fairly realised that they ever had been down? Had he not seen them shot through hedges like cannon-balls, hurled into the water like millstones, dragged across stubble-fields by their

stirrups, or emerging with a disarranged cravat or a small scratch upon their face from under four struggling hoofs, a single blow of any one of which would have amply sufficed to dash their brains to powder and pulp? There is a German saying to the effect that a special legion of guardian angels has been told off to guide the steps of drunkards: for my part, I believe that the individual known as the British fox-hunter is watched over by just such a legion of angels, and that these angels must be specially well mounted as regards wings.

"Who talks of his being killed? Eh?" said Lord Kippendale. "Let me get to him. Frances, this is not your place. There, hold his head up. Has any one gone for a doctor? Frances, stand aside; there are the others too. You must be mad, child. Go to your sister; this is not your place."

"It is my place!" was all she said between her set teeth, and with her two hands she chafed Sir Peter's cold fingers. Of his face she saw nothing, for the tears hung so thick *in her lashes* that she was blind.

"He moved now," said some one. "Hold him up a little more;" and presently through the haze of her tears Lady Baby became dimly aware that it was Nicky who was holding Sir Peter up. Water was being poured on his face; there were more people gathered round—some on the road, some in the field. She heard her sister saying something to her, and then she felt herself pulled rather roughly to her feet, and found that her brother was leading her forcibly from the spot.

"Germaine, leave me," she said, staring at him with unnaturally distended eyes; "I must know if he is alive."

"He is alive," said Germaine, rather sternly. "Don't you hear that he has moved? Come away!"

"He has opened his eyes," called out Lord Kippendale, "he seems conscious; we shall get him to the carriage."

"Lady Baby ceased to struggle with her brother. "Yes, I will come away," she said. "Give me your arm, Germaine; help me, I feel dizzy. Did I say anything? What did

I say? How did it happen?" She staggered and fell against her brother's arm. He caught her, looked her in the face, and saw that she had fainted.

"You know me, Wyndhurst, don't you?" asked Lord Kippendale, bending over the fallen man.

Sir Peter said "Yes," very faintly.

"You have had a fall, you know; but we are going to get you home now. You fell from your horse; you understand me, don't you."

An ample experience in the hunting-field had taught Lord Kippendale that men newly fallen upon their heads must be addressed in the simplest of A B C phrases, confined, if possible, to words of one syllable."

"Yes," said Sir Peter, "I understand."

Something like a smile flickered over his face as he said it, and his eyes wandered round the group, as though in search of something. Then they closed again, not having found what they wanted. In this semi-unconscious state he was transported to the carriage, but began to revive *before reaching the house.*

The first fumes of panic once dispersed, the case appeared far from desperate or even seriously alarming. The village doctor, at whose house two frantic grooms had simultaneously arrived with the news that Sir Peter Wyndhurst had broken his neck, and that he (the village doctor) was required to set it again, was almost disappointed to find nothing but a simple fracture of the arm. "It will only be one bad moment, Sir Peter," said the old doctor, rather nervously, for it was not every day that he was asked to set a baronet's arm; "it may be a little painful, for the swelling has begun; but if you don't feel quite strong enough I have chloroform by me."

"Thanks," said Sir Peter, whose equanimity had returned with his consciousness, "but chloroform is too sensational for my taste. I like having my wits about me. Will you begin now? May I talk while you are doing it? I want a question answered."

"I should prefer answering it when we have got the bone in its place," replied the doctor in a flurry. "It will be a wrench, Sir Peter."

"But I prefer having the answer now. Oh yes, I perceive that it is a wrench. What I want to know is whether this wrench is to be the end of it? or whether any of my other bones are out of gear? I'm not come to crutches, am I?"

"Crutches! Preserve us, Sir Peter, no! You will walk as straight as ever you did. There's positively nothing wrong but a fracture of the arm and a sort of general shaking."

"Yes, so I thought; but I like certainty. And about my face—is it badly marked? My nose isn't smashed, is it? Any lasting disfigurement?"

"Nothing but a cut on the forehead, Sir Peter; that's the only thing that might leave a scar."

"A very ugly scar?" asked Sir Peter.

"Upon my word, Wyndhurst," said Lord Kippendale, "you might as well be a London beauty come to grief in the hunting-field. Your face isn't your fortune, you know."

Sir Peter said nothing for a minute, then

turned his head sharply on the pillow and looked the old doctor straight in the eyes. "Will you swear that you are not mincing matters because you happen to think that I have a touch of fever about me? Will you swear that I shall be the same man again that I was an hour ago?"

The doctor not only swore, but was profuse in his oaths, and the operation being completed, and mental agitation being warned against in the usual set form, the old man withdrew for the present.

"Lord Kippendale," said Sir Peter, as the door closed, "you heard what he said about my being all right again in a few weeks?"

"Certainly I heard."

"And I think he was speaking the truth."

"Of course. So do I."

"Then, Lord Kippendale, would you oblige me by asking your daughter whether she will marry me?"

"Eh? what?" cried Lord Kippendale, bounding from his chair. "My daughter? Tut, tut—nonsense! This is the fever setting

in ; where's your pulse ? Upon my word, I can't find your pulse."

"When you have quite done with my pulse, will you go and speak to your daughter?"

"Eh ? No ; I shall do nothing of the sort. What do you know about my daughter ? You couldn't have heard anything she said, — you were unconscious, you know. All nonsense, all nonsense. You were unconscious, Wyndhurst, weren't you ?" he asked sharply.

A very faint tinge of colour appeared on Sir Peter's forehead.

"Lord Kippendale, I will tell you the truth. I *was* unconscious, 'so help me God ! I must have been, for I remember hearing a sound of wood breaking beneath me, and then all was a blank until I felt something upon my face, and heard a voice speaking. It was something like warm rain that I felt on my face, Lord Kippendale, and it woke me. I did not quite say to myself, "These are her tears, and this is her hand upon mine," — I was too dazed for that ; but I dimly understood something, and I *do* believe I kept my eyes closed just about half

a minute longer than was absolutely necessary. I am afraid it was a shabby thing to do."

Lord Kippendale was pacing the room in extreme agitation. "I am not sure that it wasn't shabby," he said; "no, it wasn't fair upon the child; and women's nerves always are such a touch-and-go affair, either all up or all down."

"Then will you take her my message? I only waited to send it until I was quite sure that I was not going to be a wreck or a cripple."

"Tut, tut, Wyndhurst! this is delirium. The child only lost her head. We all saw that."

"Exactly. And do you want to have it said that this losing of head was all on her side, and none of it on mine? There were witnesses enough."

"There's something in that," said Lord Kippendale, frowning. "But, Wyndhurst, I can't accept it; it's a whim, it's a sacrifice."

"It is not a very great sacrifice," said Sir Peter, in a tone which made Lord Kippendale turn and stare at him.

"What do you mean? Eh? Upon my word, I don't understand anything about it."

"I mean that I asked your daughter last week whether she would have me, and she said she would not. I thought you knew that. Would you mind going and asking her again now? If you refuse, I shall be mentally agitated, and you heard what the doctor said."

The old Earl left the room without another word. In less than five minutes he was back again.

"Upon my word," he said, "I understand less than ever what it is all about. She wouldn't have you last week, you say, and now she says she will. It's the cropper that's done it, you know; but I hope she knows her own mind."

"I know mine," said Sir Peter, as Lord Kippendale wrung his hand rather more vigorously perhaps than the old doctor would have approved of.

And thus ended the birthday picnic, and next day the news of the betrothal flew round the county, simultaneously with the news of *the accident*.

CHAPTER XII.

LADY EUPHROSYNE.

"Oh then up gat his fause mither!"

LADY EUPHROSYNE WYNDHURST was sitting at an elegantly appointed writing-table, occupied in answering a number of very elegant notes, when the news of her step-son's engagement became known to her. She was a faint-coloured woman of forty-five, with faint blue eyes, faintly silvered hair, and a deeply exhausted voice. The same exhaustion was discernible in her manner, which seemed to say, "The calls upon my time are great; but I am not one to shirk the responsibilities of my position." Lady Euphrosyne was a duke's daughter, who had made the mistake

of marrying a baronet, and had never ceased regretting it; as, indeed, neither had the baronet. Some people called her a martyr, and some people called her a humbug; but everybody—that is, everybody in her own peculiar circle of society—agreed that in the most intricate questions of drawing-room and dining-room etiquette no one was so deeply versed and so firmly established as Lady Euphrosyne Wyndhurst. This own peculiar circle of hers was not exactly that *crème de la crème*, among whom, indeed, she was tolerated by reason of her birth, but had never been cajoled: for the *crème* did not care about etiquette, and believed firmly in themselves, whereas the section which represents the skim-milk of society believed as firmly in printed rules. As there were a great many printed rules, and they were difficult to remember, it was, of course, delightful to find some one who had them at her finger-ends; and besides, how very nice that it should be the daughter of a real duke who *told you* what to do! It was in this circle,

therefore, that Lady Euphrosyne reigned supreme, and found opportunity to indulge to her heart's content that affection for minute rules and observances which was her nearest approach to a ruling passion. She was for ever receiving little notes, smelling of violet, moss-rose, or verbena, folded into playful triangles, or twisted into artistic spills, and running something in this fashion:—

“Dear Lady Euphrosyne, you would oblige me infinitely by giving me your opinion on the arrangements for my afternoon party: is claret or champagne cup most *chic* this season?” &c. Or, “Dear Lady Euphrosyne, excuse the great liberty I take in addressing you, but your universally acknowledged kindness emboldens me in this case. Would it be considered *unfeeling* to dance in crape? My sweet child Amy is clamouring to be taken to the Lackmans’ dance, and, of course, I could not be so *heartless* as to let her wear colours,” &c. Or from a more intimate quarter: “Dearest Euphrosyne, you are so well up in these things, does a bishop’s niece

take precedence of a captain's widow?" &c., &c., &c.

The answering of these notes constituted a great portion of the calls upon Lady Euphrosyne's time. But there were other duties too, and heavier ones; for though she had no daughter grown up, Lady Euphrosyne would have considered it unfair to her circle to have closed her doors in its face, and thus deprived the unenlightened of so many hints on etiquette to be had here *gratis*. When the more intimate of her bosom friends, perhaps jealous of her influence, would implore her to spare herself, and take more rest, Lady Euphrosyne would give a faint smile of resignation, and faintly concede that the calls upon her time certainly were very great, but that she hoped to drag herself on a little longer. She could not give in just in the thick of the season: it would cause too much surprise, and possibly disappointment. She could not overthrow every one's arrangements on account of a touch of *migraine*. Yes, she must confess that her *head* did ache rather badly to-day; but a

darkened room and a sofa *might* perhaps relieve it in time for her to dress, before dining with young Mrs Pauncelot. She was so inexperienced, poor young bride, and Lady Euphrosyne had promised, positively *promised*, to help her in receiving her guests that night. And the bosom friends would go home and gnash their teeth, and when the supreme moment came Lady Euphrosyne would deck herself with flowers like the victims of old, and walk to her post by the door, as a lamb walks to the altar.

This morning, while preparing to enter on her daily correspondence, Lady Euphrosyne espied among the three-cornered and fantastically twisted notes one very plain square one, sealed with a coat-of-arms which she knew. Those three stars on an azure ground figured very generally in the arms of those families whose ancestors have lived on the Borders, and been partial to starlight excursions. "From Kippendale," said Lady Euphrosyne; "what can the Kippendale people possibly want of me?" With a very soft

sigh she broke the seal, but her eyes grew stony as she read. The letter was from Lord Kippendale, written at Sir Peter's desire, and very briefly announcing the engagement of Sir Peter to his daughter.

“DEAR LADY EUPHROSYNE,—Sir Peter (who broke his arm yesterday, but is doing well) wishes me to say that my daughter Frances and he have agreed to get married as soon as the matter can reasonably be arranged. Hoping this finds you well, I am your obedient servant,
KIPPENDALE.”

“At last! Then it has come at last! In spite of all my care!” cried the distracted martyr of society, springing to her feet, and allowing her languor to drop from her like a cloak; “and I thought he was quite safe down there! I forgot the existence of that child, or rather, I forgot her age; I thought she was in the nursery. Engaged? This is overwhelming! And what has he been after? *Broken his arm?* It might just as well have

been——” She left the phrase unfinished; but if she had gone on in the first breath, it would have run thus: “It might just as well have been his neck.”

Not that Lady Euphrosyne was accustomed to harbour such very black thoughts towards her stepson. To do her justice, she really would have felt shocked if he had broken his neck, but no one could have expected her to be inconsolable. Even when Peter had been a boy, and, by reason of his youth, placed at her mercy, Lady Euphrosyne had never played the part of the step-mothers in the fairy tales: she had neither cuffed him in public nor pinched him in private; for that would have been so very incorrect, any woman with a glimmering of social knowledge would have pronounced such a proceeding bad style. But no treatise on etiquette told her that she must love her step-son; and besides, it became very soon evident that her step-son did not love her. He was a very quiet boy, peculiar in his ways, and extremely delicate, so that the hope of seeing one of her own sons coming to the

title appeared far from irrational. She had close upon half-a-dozen of them, all healthy, all boisterous, and all as passionately addicted to riding as their father. Lady Euphrosyne herself rode with great ease and elegance, but she preferred the park to the hunting-field—as, indeed, all her tastes clung to paved streets rather than to country roads. It had always been a trial to her to see her five precious boys picking out the very straightest line across country. And it was hard to think that, just to spite these five rosy cherubs and their loving mother, Peter had to be born a dozen years ahead of them. Unfortunately, too, as he grew older he grew less delicate; a long course of sea-air made him almost robust. But there remained another hope; for though he grew less delicate he did not grow less peculiar. He preferred galleries to ball-rooms, and marbles to women. Lady Euphrosyne had been the first to discover her step-son's artistic talent, and had eagerly favoured its development; it kept him so well occupied. *The yacht*, too, was a capital invention: this

wandering sort of artist life was the very thing she would herself have chosen for him ; and when yacht and Peter—as sometimes happened—disappeared for a month or two at a time, there could not fail to be a sort of pleasing excitement in the question as to whether they would ever again reappear.

Her fears as to Peter making a choice in life had for a long time past been lulled into quietude, so Lord Kippendale's cruelly concise note was a shock almost stupefying.

"Something must be done," she said, sweeping half-a-dozen unopened notes to one side ; "something must instantly be done—but what ? I can't manage Peter, I never could ; but there must be some way of preventing it : it cannot be that this cruel wrong should be done to my five innocent boys ;" and a few real tears actually came to Lady Euphrosyne's relief. She was very fond of the five innocent boys (who at that moment were being remonstrated with by one of the police force for racing their ponies in the Park), and she was very fond too of the increase of *prestige* and power which might one

day be hers as the mother of Sir Philip or Sir David Wyndhurst. She felt that this chance was slipping from her grasp, and she was clutching wildly after it. She was just as likely as not to clutch too near or too far, and thus miss her object altogether, for she had no intellectual resources or presence of mind beyond the artificial sort which she used in social life.

After she had hastily rung the bell, she had got no order ready for the servant; and when she had told him that the boxes were to be packed for Nolesworth that night, she was not yet clear with herself as to what good her presence at Nolesworth would do. But to go she was resolved, even though the cards for her ball—the first ball she had given since her widowhood—were out. People's arrangements must just be upset. There was no question now as to whether that "sweet child Amy" was to be allowed to dance in crape or not, and the bishop's niece might mortally offend the captain's widow for aught Lady Euphrosyne cared. Her step-son's accident, conveniently *magnified* for the occasion, was quite enough to

explain her flight ; and though society might mourn, it would understand. A hasty glance over the list of engagements on the white china slate, a hasty despatching of explanatory notes, a great rushing about of ladies'-maids, and looking-up of time-tables, and Lady Euphrosyne, in her normal state of exhaustion, but still abnormally bewildered, found herself flying towards the north.

Sir Peter was not at the castle ; he had not yet been moved from Kippendale. Lady Euphrosyne lost no time in visiting her stepson, but got little satisfaction from her visit. Yes, he said, there was no mistake about it, he was engaged to Lady Frances Bevan. Was the acquaintance a short one ? Possibly it was ; yes, certainly she was very young, but that was a defect which time was generally supposed to mend. He believed that other men of twenty-seven had married girls of seventeen without anything very dreadful coming of it. He was much obliged, though, for her anxiety regarding his future welfare ; he shared the same wishes himself.

It was not till some ten days later that the first passage-of-arms took place between Lady Euphrosyne and her future step-daughter-in-law. Their meetings had been of too hurried and transitory a nature to allow of much mutual study, until one day Lady Euphrosyne, driving over, found Sir Peter in one of the morning-rooms, with his arm in a sling, and Lady Baby sitting on a footstool beside him. It was a fortnight now since the accident, and this was the invalid's first appearance downstairs.

"I suppose I can give orders for your rooms to be got ready," said Lady Euphrosyne, when, with one of her faintest smiles, she had congratulated her step-son on this improvement. "Of course you will move to Nolesworth this week."

"Oh, but he is not going to move," said Lady Baby. "I don't want him to move."

Lady Euphrosyne did not look at Lady Baby; she looked past her, in a way which said as plainly as words, "Young girls in good *society* generally wait till they are spoken to."

"Will you have the close or the open carriage, Peter, for driving over?"

"Neither, thanks; I am not coming over just yet."

"But," said Lady Euphrosyne, "it is so unusual, you know, when your own house is close by. There is a sort of custom in these things. It is always bad taste to do what is unusual."

"I like unusual things," said Lady Baby. She had her chin up in the air, and was looking dangerous. There was always some mischief to be expected when Lady Baby's chin took that upward direction. She had grasped the outline of Lady Euphrosyne's attitude, and had taken up her own; for no deer that ever sniffed the forest breeze was quicker in scenting danger than was Lady Baby in guessing at the faintest shadow of a patronising control. Lady Euphrosyne, on her side, had an instinct in divining tractable and intractable subjects—those that would be led by her superior wisdom and those that would not. She had hitherto disliked her future step-daughter-in-law because she was

her future step-daughter-in-law ; but from this moment forward she disliked her because she was herself.

‘ Then am I to understand,” she resumed, with a quiver in her voice, and looking *through* Lady Baby, by way of a change, instead of past her,—“ am I to understand that Peter means to take up his quarters here until the—the——?” the word stuck in her throat.

“ Until the wedding,” finished Peter. “ No ; not quite. Of course there will be matters to be looked after at Nolesworth.”

“ We are going to have a tenants’ ball,” broke in Lady Baby, “ and I hear I shall have to dance with all the farmers.”

“ With *all* the farmers,” echoed Lady Euphrosyne, with a little gasp, for matters were going at an awfully fast pace, and she felt more helpless than ever in averting their course. “ Nobody expects a bride to dance with *all* the farmers,—such a thing is never done ; she need only——”

“ Dance with the young and good-looking *ones* ?” suggested Lady Baby, with a gleam

in her eye. "That is just what I have been saying to Peter; but he didn't seem to see it, somehow."

"Excuse me, I meant to say that a bride is only expected to open the ball with the chief tenant; and of course if there happen to be some old and valued farmers on the estate to whom it is thought advisable to show a little extra favour, they can be given a turn. This is what is generally done."

"Really?" said Lady Baby, with a provoking smile; "it is not what I am going to do: I mean to dance with the sons of the old and valued farmers; and, by the by, Lady Euphrosyne, you have not given up dancing, have you? Perhaps you would consent to take the fathers off my hands?"

Lady Euphrosyne shut her eyes, shuddered, and shortly afterwards retired, feeling generally routed and baffled. "How Peter could make such a choice is to me a mystery," she reflected. "There is no getting over the fact that she has turned out pretty, and of course people in London have not got complexions like that;

but after all, she is only a piece of inelegant rusticity — and as for her education, I don't know when I have seen such a display of ignorance on the simplest points of *savoir-faire!*” The question of the forms attending the wedding had for the moment almost swamped the question of the wedding itself; and what she termed the “country-bumpkin tone” in which the tenants' ball had been discussed was very nearly as upsetting to her as the consideration of the main point. With regard to that there had come over her a hopeless sensation of drifting towards the dreaded rock without a straw to catch at. Without aim or plan she had rushed to the scene of action, and without aim or plan she now continued weakly to harass the enemy's flanks. It would have been hard to say what result she expected from these tactics.

“I am so glad your step-mother has come,” said Lady Baby, almost fervently, when Lady Euphrosyne had retired after the discussion of the tenants' ball.

"Why?" asked Sir Peter.

"Because she is the first person who disapproves of our engagement. I was afraid that everybody was going to approve, and that would have been so monotonous."

She gave an impatient sigh, and threw back her head against the wall.

"Was I not right when I wanted you to wear the *bonnet rouge*?" said Sir Peter, watching her through his half-closed eyelids.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if you cannot be a despot you would wish to be a rebel."

"Oh, don't begin that again," she said with a frown, and she put up her hand to close his mouth; but the little white fingers were taken and kissed instead, at which the frown melted into something softer, though the tip of a restless foot still beat the floor.

It was not the first time that these symptoms had shown themselves, and during the days that followed they showed themselves more frequently. In the very beginning of her engagement the newly affianced bride had

been unusually quiet and subdued. Gradually, however, as Sir Peter recovered, as the engagement became fully recognised, and as good wishes and congratulatory visits poured in from all sides, Lady Baby began to show signs of restlessness. From morning to night she heard of nothing but of the general approval which was felt at her marriage. Everybody was steeped to the lips in a state of contentment and delight, so uniform as to be just a little wearisome. Lord Kippendale went about rubbing his hands and giving little approving pinches to his youngest daughter's cheek, or little sly fatherly pulls to her ear. Nicky's beaming grin grew wider every day; Germaine took every opportunity of half suffocating her in his brotherly embrace; and Agnes became almost loquacious in pointing out the great advantages of the arrangement. And as if this atmosphere of approval at home were not oppressive enough, the whole neighbourhood showed itself unanimous, even clamorous, in declaring that such a suitable marriage had not *for years past* been heard of. It was, in fact,

so incredibly suitable that words ran short to express its suitability. All the fox-hunting squires had felt convinced that this was going to be the end from the very moment that they had seen Sir Peter in his helmet as Launcelot. That had been the first step towards the making up of the feud, and this would be the final dissolution of that estrangement which had, of course, not failed to throw a certain chill upon the social life of the neighbourhood. In one word, the marriage was considered very nearly as a political event; and, as Maud Epperton suggested, it was evidently felt by some among the Border families that the union of the crowns was only now about to be accomplished. Maud's own personal congratulations had been proffered with a warmth which was not the less sincere from being somewhat mixed in its elements.

"To think that the Border raid was to end in this way!" she said, laughing softly, as she held Lady Baby's hands and looked into her eyes. "If a Border minstrel had risen from his grave on that day to foretell this one, I should have given him the lie." She stooped and kissed

the younger girl's cheek. "You will be very happy," she added, turning away, for she did not want Lady Baby to see the tears that even in the very saying of the words had sprung to her eyes. It was not that she grudged Lady Baby her happiness; "Live and let live" had ever been Maud's motto. But after all, in order to let others live you must first live yourself; and at this moment the contrast between their two lots sprang up rather sharply. Brought suddenly face to face with the actual reality of the match which Lady Baby was about to make, its brilliancy flashed, as it were, straight into her eyes, Maud could not fail very vividly to remember that she had once intended to make that match herself. There had even been moments lately, passing moments, when meeting Sir Peter's artist's eye upon her, the haunting question had risen to her mind, "Would it, after all, have been impossible? Did I not throw up the game too soon?" She was asking herself the question now, even as she turned away from Lady Baby; and yet, for all that, her kiss had *been sincere.*

From one person alone had Lady Baby heard not even the most set phrase of congratulation, or received the most conventional pressure of the hand. Mr Carbury had left the house abruptly on the morrow of the picnic. It was natural, under the circumstances, that he should go ; but he need not have gone in such a hurry. Perhaps, as Germaine suggested, he was huffed at the small recognition which his feat of horsemanship had met with ; for, from the moment of Sir Peter's fall, no one had so much as asked after the small stable-boy's fate, and probably no one but the small boy himself was aware of the skill with which the runaway dog-cart had been rescued.

So Mr Carbury went ; but he did not go back to London — he quite unexpectedly discovered that he had some more visits to pay in Scotland, and, as Germaine reported a few days later, he was “ still haunting the neighbourhood.”

But Lady Baby had never noticed this one blank in the stereotyped congratulations. The delight seemed to her to be universal, and the more this universal satisfaction showed itself

the more restless did she grow. When the first excitement of unpacking wedding-presents had worn off, she began to get tired of the eternal tea-sets and fire-screens, and to exhibit impatience at the sight of new parcels. "There is something the matter with you," said Sir Peter, one day, when she had pushed aside a set of ormolu writing things, having scarcely taken the trouble to examine them.

"There is nothing the matter with me; but I am sick of writing notes of thanks, and I have no more room to put the things away. There are seven writing-table sets on the top of my wardrobe already, and I daren't move for fear of knocking down china vases. I shall get Maud to answer my notes now. She writes notes beautifully."

"Shall I tell you what is the matter with you?" asked Sir Peter, having quietly waited till she had done speaking.

"What?"

"It is prosperity that is the matter with you. Things are going so smooth that you

would like a little adversity to roughen them a bit. Where are you going to?"

"Up-stairs, to Maud, to speak about the notes," said Lady Baby rather frigidly, as she walked to the door. She made her exit with great dignity; but outside she turned her face once more and went through a fierce little bit of pantomime, which consisted in a phantom stamp and a small fist shaken at the curtained entrance. Then, instead of going up-stairs at once, she sat down on the lowest step of the staircase, and seemed intent on deliberately digging the nails of one hand into the palm of the other.

Was there something wrong, then, beyond the mere want of resistance in her surroundings? Were the skirmishes with Lady Euphrosyne insufficient to support her spirit under these tryingly peaceful circumstances? As Lady Baby sat on the staircase with clenched hands, there was a gleam as of angry tears in her eyes. "I wish," she said, through her set teeth,—“I wish he was not so exasperatingly quiet!"

Here, then, was the root of the evil. For in the midst of the general enthusiasm there was one person who preserved his calmness to an unwarrantable degree, and that person was Sir Peter. In the first days after the accident no very desperate demonstration could be expected of him; but, as convalescence made rapid strides, Lady Baby began to own to herself, secretly at first, that she had expected something more, she was not quite sure what, but, at any rate, more display of that affection of which, in a few grave words, he had assured her on the first day. Those few grave words had done very well to start with; but she wished to hear variations worked upon this theme, languishing, passionate, even perhaps a little sentimental, and as the days passed, these variations did not appear. Soon she began to tell herself that there was a great deal too little of the completely subjugated slave in his attitude towards her, and a great deal too much of the self-possessed everyday man. He did not appear to regard every lightly breathed wish of hers as a command; he seemed quite

capable of discerning imperfections in her actions ; he still read his newspapers ; he still used his pencil, and her portrait did not fill the pages of his sketch-book to the exclusion of all others—at any rate, not to the exclusion of Miss Epperton, who figured there quite as often as hitherto. He took no part in the skirmishes with Lady Euphrosyne ; occasionally even he looked grave, when, of course, he should have been laughing like the others over her petulant sallies.

Was this to be borne without complaint ? Not by Lady Baby at any rate, who, as far back as her memory could reach, had imposed her whims and fancies on the household as commands ; who had made slaves of her nurses and governesses, and fully meant to do the same by her husband.

There was one circumstance which specially fed the smouldering fire of her discontent, for, uncontrolled as she was by motherly authority, Lady Baby had dipped pretty freely into the fiction of the period. Though no one had ever suspected her of it, she had held locked

away in her inner consciousness a very fair show of romantic ideas with regard to the qualifications to be expected of a lover. She had read of "burning oaths," of "delirious joy," of "frenzied glances"; she had read also of men going down on their knees and talking by the page in one breath, and never in anything under superlatives. Lady Baby had not doubted that her lover would do all these things, or, at least, a reasonable amount of them; in fact, she had a hazy notion that a kneeling posture was almost *de rigueur* in putting the momentous question, and that a declaration made in a less sensational attitude was the exception and not the rule. But Sir Peter had never looked or said anything that, by the wildest stretch of imagination, could be construed as frenzied; and he had never offered to go down upon so much as one knee. As to this latter point, allowances had of course to be made at first: for several days after the accident Sir Peter's knees were probably not in a kneeling condition. But Lady Baby watched his progress critically, and, having noted that

his joints had regained their normal flexibility, she knew that there was no further excuse for him. It was extremely mortifying, and each failure was more mortifying than the last, for Lady Baby had tried, in various small ways, cautiously at first, and then more boldly, to discover some means of rousing the fund of dormant ardour which she still hoped to find concealed somewhere about his nature. Hitherto, if existent, it remained dormant. She had tried coldness, she had tried a little sulking, she had tried sarcasm ; they produced no impression. Sir Peter persisted in keeping his temper, and in being, as Lady Baby said, with tears of anger in her eyes, "so exasperatingly quiet."

Having relieved her feelings to this extent she went up-stairs, but not to look for Maud ; she went to Agnes's room.

"Agnes," she began abruptly, "tell me all about how Nicky behaved when you were engaged."

"But, child, I have told you all that I can. You cannot, you really cannot, expect me to repeat every word he said."

"No, of course not," and Lady Baby gave a rather stormy sigh, as it struck her how very easily she could repeat every word that Sir Peter had ever said; "but tell me the sort of things. Did he tell you every day that his life without you would be an aching void or a howling blank, or whatever the right expression is?"

"Not every day," said Agnes, truthfully; "but he did say so occasionally. At least he did not put it quite in these words; he used to say, 'I'm quite the luckiest fellow going, Aggie; and by Jove——'"

"Oh, bother the words; I only mean the sense, of course. But Agnes, tell me, did he—did he ever go down on his knees to you?"

"Never!" said Agnes, dropping her work in her lap. "That would have been dreadful! There was no need for that. I——"

"Yes; I suppose you would have been more likely to go on your knees to him. I daresay you do so now in private; but then I shall never 'honour and obey' my husband to the ridiculous extent that you do, Agnes. You

always talk as if you had invented matrimony, and were bound to show how well it worked. And yet Nicky could make very nice speeches, even if he did say 'by Jove' in the middle of the tenderest part. Peter doesn't even say 'by Jove.'"

"Sir Peter and Nicky are very different," said Agnes.

"As if that was not obvious to the meanest capacity! Do make some more original suggestion: leave Nicky alone; he is exhausted. Tell me more about George and Kate. George was very madly in love, was he not? He must have been; he did everything madly."

"Poor George was rather trying, I believe; at least Kate says so. They were always having scenes; and—oh yes, as for George, I have seen him dozens of times on his knees before Kate."

Lady Baby sat down and knit her brows intently. "What did they have scenes about?"

"George had an unfortunate temperament; he was extremely jealous."

"Jealous!" repeated Lady Baby, thoughtfully. "Yes, go on; tell me more. Who was he jealous of?"

"Of anybody to whom Kate was at all civil. They must have had a dozen quarrels in the course of their engagement; but it always ended in George going down on his knees and making wilder and wilder protestations, and being more frantically attached than ever to Kate."

"I have read somewhere something about lovers' quarrels being the renewal of love," said Lady Baby, staring dreamily from the window. "There is a carriage going round to the stables. More visitors, beaming all over with congratulations, I suppose. Horrible! This time I shall strike; I shall not show myself;—and, what was I saying, Agnes? Yes, about quarrels. Then I suppose it is jealousy that makes the quarrels usually, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," Agnes began, when the door opened and Germaine put in his head.

"The Smarts are in the drawing-room," he announced. "They want to see Frances."

"They must just want; I am not coming down."

"Wait a bit. Carbury is with them. He has been staying there since Wednesday, it seems. Do come down, Frances. I never know how to talk to Carbury. He's so awfully well up in everything."

"Well, I don't want to talk to him either. Hand him over to somebody else."

"I handed him over to Wyndhurst; but somehow they don't seem to be hitting it off together."

"Peter? Is Peter in the drawing-room too? Yes, I think I will come," said Lady Baby, with a sudden change of manner. "Agnes, will my hair do?"

"I think so," said Agnes, putting a stray lock back in its place; and then something in her sister's eyes seemed to startle her, for she caught her hand.

"Baby, what is the matter? You are not going to—to do anything foolish, are you?"

"Quite the contrary; I am going to be extremely wise," said Lady Baby, pulling away

her hand—"much wiser than anybody would give me credit for. Good-bye!" and turning once more at the door to nod to Agnes, on whose broad countenance a vague panic was written, Lady Baby slowly descended the staircase to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XIII.

LADY BABY TRIES AN EXPERIMENT.

"Beyond her sex, she was not wise."

THE Smarts were a large family, in which the female element beat the male quite out of the field. There were several daughters—people were never quite sure of the number—and none of them were much under six feet. Mr Smart was generally described as having forty-two feet of daughter, and people divided the forty-two feet in their minds as they liked best. Also all the daughters wore blue gauze veils at all seasons and on almost all occasions. Mr Smart, of course, had no blue gauze on his hat; but he looked as if he ought to have had, and as if his abstinence from blue gauze was only a

concession to the rigours of fashion. No one had ever pierced the cause of the blue gauze phenomenon. Some people had suggested a large stock of gauze bought up cheap at some remote period, others inclined to believe in an interest in the silk trade, or a system of walking advertisements for a London firm; but the mystery never had been unravelled, and never was, and the fact remained that blue gauze seemed to grow as naturally on the Miss Smarts' heads as hair does on that of other people. Imagination succumbed when asked to picture the number of yards of blue gauze which must in the course of even recent years have been immolated on these six-foot high altars; of the miles of the material which of necessity had been blown rough by the wind, stiffened by the rain, and blistered by the sun, within the memory of Smarts and their neighbours. The selection of daughters which Mr Smart had brought with him had new veils on to-day, and the effusion of their congratulations was on a par with the festive freshness of their head-decoration.

"Thanks, yes, thanks," said Lady Baby, gasping for breath. "Mr Carbury," and she turned to the nearest means of escape, "why have you not come near us before? You left us in the most uncereemonious fashion. I don't believe you said good-bye."

"I had to go," said Carbury. He was sitting near her, but he did not look at her as he spoke. He stared down hard into his hat, and there was something like a nervous twitch in the muscles of his cheek. He looked older to-day, more weary and more world-worn than she had ever seen him look; but the observation of this merely flashed through her mind, without awakening curiosity.

"It was so very good of Mr Carbury to come," the biggest Miss Smart was explaining to Maud. "Pa has asked him so often, but, of course, his engagements are numerous; however, he seems to be getting fond of Scotland now, and as for his tennis-service, it's simply lovely. Do you play tennis, Lord Germaine? Oh no, I suppose it's too tame for you; polo's your game, of course; we've heard that you've been

making a polo-ground in the park. Is it ready yet? When are you going to play?"

"I don't know," said Germaine, blushing at being thus publicly addressed; "two of the fellows from the barracks promised to play, but I haven't been able to secure a fourth player, and it's an awful pity, too, for Miss Epperton," and he blushed a shade deeper. "Miss Epperton likes polo—I mean, she likes looking on," and Germaine, in an agony of shyness, began in sheer desperation to kick the fender. He had imagined that he had confided his remark to one Miss Smart alone; but his voice unfortunately was one of those that are more easily raised than moderated. To his horror he saw all the blue gauze in the room turning in his direction.

"Germaine, if it's only a fourth player you want," said Lady Baby, abruptly, "why don't you ask Mr Carbury to come over and play polo with you?"

Germaine looked doubtfully in Carbury's direction; Carbury was sure to be as tired of *polo* as of everything else. "It would bore

him so awfully," muttered Germaine, but he looked at Carbury wistfully, all the same. Carbury himself said nothing. He flushed, suddenly but very slightly, and he sat still staring into his hat.

"Mr Carbury, would it bore you awfully?" asked Lady Baby.

"I—I don't quite understand," said Carbury, with curious hesitation.

"Of course it would be awfully good if you would play," burst out Germaine, fired by the idea; "I know you're a dab hand at polo."

"Germaine is asking whether you will come over and play. Do you understand now, Mr Carbury?" He seemed very slow at understanding.

"I can't come over," said Carbury, suddenly; "I can't come over here."

"Why not?" asked Lady Baby. "You had better give a good reason, for you are not going to be let off without one."

"I must go back to London," he said hurriedly, and again he did not raise his eyes to

her, but sat staring into his hat as if his very life depended upon it.

"To London? Oh, Mr Carbury!" gasped the biggest Miss Smart, shaking half-a-dozen yards of blue gauze reprovingly, "and you talked yesterday of being in Scotland for our tennis-match."

"Did I? I don't know, I don't think I can," said Carbury, almost helplessly. His tone was rapid and uneasy, like a man who has lost his hold upon something, and is drifting away against his will.

"I am sorry," stammered Germaine, resignedly, "but of course don't put yourself out."

"Does Craigtoun not play?" interrupted Carbury.

"Nicky is away," said Lady Baby; "he went up for the Derby, and he usually takes a long time to come back again."

"And when he does come back it will be with his 'pockets full of tin,'" suggested Mr Smart, meaning to say something jocular and pleasant, but hitting unluckily on a rather sore point.

"It will be with nothing of the sort," retorted Lord Kippendale, somewhat sharply. "We go in for horses, Mr Smart, but not for betting-books."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr Smart, alarmed at the effect of his harmless joke, but in his wish to clear himself floundering still deeper in the mud, "I didn't intend any criticism; betting-books in moderation are all right of course, and Mr Craigtoun has, I believe, been always lucky, at least so I have always heard, for I positively know nothing about it——"

"That is very evident," said Lord Kippendale, who had grown rather red in the face. "If you have heard anything concerning my son-in-law meddling in the betting-ring, they are idle reports, understand me—idle reports. He goes to the Derby because every man with a well-balanced mind likes to see good horses and good running."

"Oh, pa, *do* hold your tongue," whispered the nearest Miss Smart, with a warning nudge of the elbow,—“you always make the wrong remarks;” and Mr Smart relapsed into silence,

with an uncomfortable recollection awaking in his mind that there had once been an unfortunate affair in which Lord Kippendale's son-in-law (the dead one) and a big Derby bet, gone the wrong way, had figured conspicuously and unpleasantly.

"But, about Carbury's playing," began Germaine again, undeterred by the digression, for when he had once got hold of an idea he was apt to hammer away at it. "Will you really not give us a chance, Carbury? It's only polo in a way, you know, only a scratch performance," he added, with the candour of an honest seller who is determined not to overpraise his wares.

"It is very kind of you to ask me," began Carbury, "but——"

"But it is not he who is asking you," said Lady Baby all at once, leaning forward a little, "it is I."

He gave something like a start. "You? You are asking me to come?" But still, for some reason or other, he seemed unable to meet her eyes. "Don't ask me," he added abruptly; "*it is better not.*"

"You are not particularly complimentary to-day," she said, with a touch of petulance. "Mr Carbury, I ask you to come as a favour—to me. Is that enough?"

No one else was speaking at the moment, so her words were audible to every one, and every one, too, saw the eagerness on her face, as she sat bending forward with her eyes on Carbury. There was a quiver among the gauze veils, a glance of surprise from Maud, a broad stare from Germaine.

Mr Carbury looked up rapidly and furtively, like a guilty man discovered. His glance only swept over her face to pass to Sir Peter, who had sat all this time quite silent in the background. Lady Baby knew that he was there; while she had been talking to Mr Carbury she was listening for Sir Peter's voice to interpose, and instinctively she had guessed where now Mr Carbury's glance was directed. She would have given a great deal, a very great deal, to have known at that moment what change was passing over Sir Peter's face, or whether any change was there. A friendly mirror might

have aided her, but there was none in the desired position, and to turn her head would have been a great deal too undignified. If she gazed intently into Mr Carbury's face it was because at this moment she was using him as a mirror, for from his look she hoped to glean some reflection of the look on Sir Peter's face. But Mr Carbury's expression did not enlighten her, his face indeed expressed nothing but a sort of blank perplexity.

"Have you made up your mind?" she asked ;
"are you coming?"

It was the same question that she had asked on the occasion of their first meeting in the green avenue, when the blackbird was singing on the tree and the buds were bursting on the branches.

"Yes," he said all at once, "I will come."

"How awfully good of you!" cried Germaine.

"When?" asked Lady Baby.

"Whenever the Miss Smarts have had enough of me," said Mr Carbury, speaking more in his usual tone.

The Miss Smarts, who were as overflowing in good-nature as in blue gauze, declared unanimously, not that they had had enough of Mr Carbury, but that they would let him go immediately rather than stand in the way of any one's pleasure. Since the polo-ground was ready, there was no reason why he should not come over next day."

"To-morrow, of course,—let it be to-morrow," said Lord Kippendale, whose propensities were of a chronically hospitable nature; "no use in putting off things. Let him come by all means to-morrow." No visitor ever was proposed for Kippendale without Lord Kippendale murmuring, in his sleep as it were, "Let him come by all means."

The Miss Smarts were already seated in the carriage, when Mr Carbury all at once muttered something about a stick, and walked back into the hall. Lady Baby was still standing there. He walked straight up to her. "Are you sure I am to come?" he asked. "Are you quite sure?"

Even then it was not too late; even then she

might have taken warning by the forced calm of his tone, by the fevered light in his eyes. But she looked in his face and saw nothing, or saw only that he had certainly worn very badly for his years. She never perceived that behind that spoken question there was another question unspoken, and that his eyes, all afire with that question, were burning themselves into hers. If a doubt crossed her mind at that moment, it was a doubt as to whether the instrument she had chosen was not too worn and weather-beaten to be of very great use. It was a pity that there was no younger man at hand, one of whom Sir Peter might more reasonably be expected to be jealous ; but since there was not, this haggard worldling must do, *faute de mieux*.

These were the only thoughts that passed through her mind as she gave him her hand once more, and once more said that he was to come. And in the next minute he was gone, and only a flutter of blue veils was to be seen as the carriage rolled down the avenue.

Lady Baby walked back deliberately into the

drawing-room. She knew that Sir Peter was still there, and she was desirous of hearing what remark he would have to make on her so unnecessarily pressing invitation to Mr Carbury. Sir Peter was deep in the evening paper; he did not look up as she entered. "Perhaps he is sulky," she hopefully reflected; and she went and busied herself with some flowers at the other end of the room, waiting for the storm to break. Presently the paper rustled, and he spoke.

"They are going to have a wonderful take of herrings it seems this year off the Norway coast," he observed, in quite his usual tone.

"I take no interest in herrings," she loftily replied.

"But I do,—or rather, I take an interest in the people and the places mentioned. How I did enjoy that cruise!"

"Perhaps you wish yourself back there?" she suggested.

"Occasionally, yes,"—and he took up the paper again.

Lady Baby came and sat down on a footstool

some little distance from him and waited. She waited some minutes, but he did not speak again. She tapped her heel against the floor, he did not move; she twisted up a scrap of paper, and threw it at him,—it only hit him on the knee, and he did not yet look up—he was smiling at something or other in the article about the Norway herrings. She aimed another pellet, more accurately this time, for it brushed his ear. He looked up with a little surprise.

“What was that? Did anything fall? Can I do anything for you?”

“No, nothing; please don’t let me engage your attention. Newspapers are so much more interesting than—than——”

“Dear me, child!” and he put down his paper; “how black you are looking! Has anything occurred to put you out of temper?”

“It is very evident that nothing has occurred to put *you* out of temper,” she said, biting her lip.

“No, nothing has that I know of. I feel all right just now, thank you.”

“I suppose,” and her voice slightly quivered

—"I suppose that you have no objection *whatever* to Mr Carbury coming here?"

"To Carbury coming here? Good heavens! No! What earthly objection could I have? Surely your father is free to ask whom he chooses."

"It was not papa who asked him,—it was I who did so;" and she tried to look unspeakable things. If the crisis was ever to come, it should have come now; if Sir Peter was ever to drop his mask of serenity (it could only be a mask), he should have dropped it now. And the drawing-room carpet was soft and thick, and could not hurt any one's knees to go down upon. Why, people in novels thought nothing of going down plump upon granite flag-stones and "shingly beaches"; even limpet-covered rocks appeared to be of no account whatever to the ardour of those gentlemen. There was no excuse for Sir Peter. But all he said was—

"Yes, I heard you inviting him; and he seemed to need some pressing, too."

"I am glad he is coming," she burst out;

"he will be a great acquisition. He knows about so many things, and I find him extremely—extremely interesting," she concluded, having hastily cast about for a suitable term.

"So do I ; vastly interesting. Carbury seems to me like a distilled essence of experience. You can't mention a place that he has not been to, or an exploit that he has not been mixed up in, or at any rate knows more about than you do. He has had all illnesses, and felt all sensations. Oh, Carbury is quite the most interesting fellow I know."

"And good-looking, too ; that is to say, he certainly must have been very handsome, and his eyes are extremely fine."

"So they are," acquiesced Sir Peter, who now was biting his moustache, as though to repress a rising smile ; "at least they would be if you had a chance of seeing them ; but he doesn't seem to think it worth while to keep them open. I suppose he is tired of seeing his fellow-creatures."

"And he can be very amusing when he chooses," persisted Lady Baby.

"Yes; but I think he is more amusing when he doesn't choose," and Sir Peter took up his paper again, this time merely for the sake of holding it before his face.

"Are you going to read your paper again?" inquired Lady Baby, bitterly. "Do you know that Nicky never read any paper at all the whole six weeks he was engaged, and that he couldn't have told what party was in office if you had shot him for it?"

"I have no difficulty in believing it. Now that he isn't engaged I never see him opening a paper."

"And do you know," she went on gloomily, "that poor George used to read poetry aloud to Kate by the hour, actually by the hour? He read her the whole of the 'Excursion' and of the 'Deserted Village,' while they were engaged; and he used to serenade her upon several sorts of instruments."

"And she did not break off the engagement?"

"Break off! They were madly in love with each other. Poor George used to call Kate his

‘fairest, whitest flower,’ and the ‘star of his life.’ I know it, because Agnes told me so.”

“I am afraid,” said Sir Peter, calmly—“I am afraid that poor George must have been rather sentimental.”

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

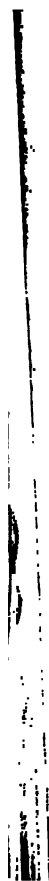
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